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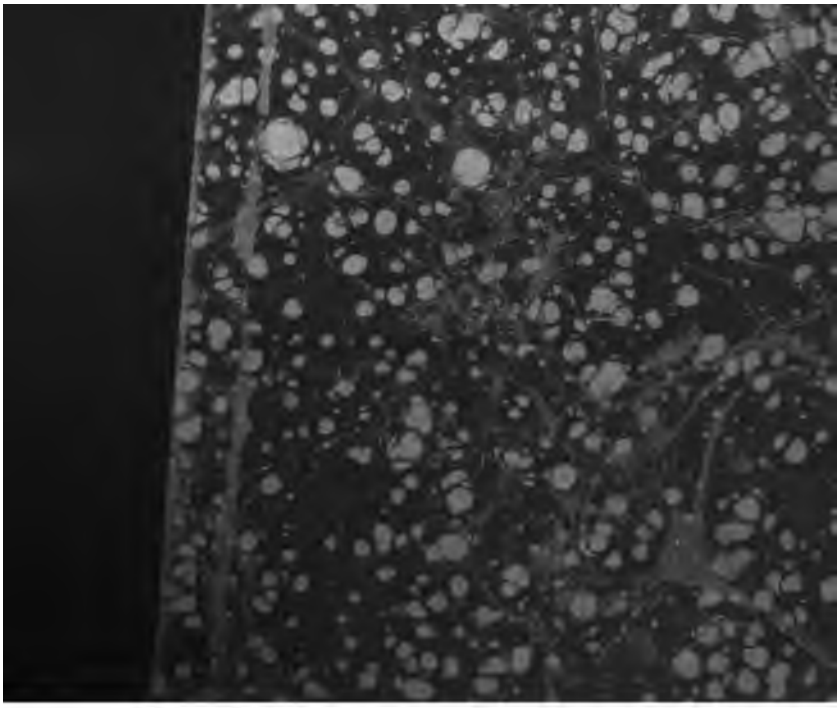
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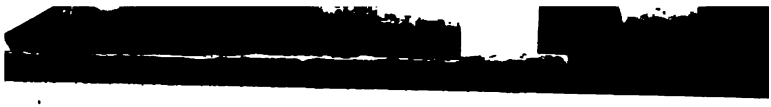








AGATHA'S AUNT



AGATHA'S AUNT

By

HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH

Author of

OTHER PEOPLE'S BUSINESS



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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	Boarders Wanted	1
II	The Curtain Rises	18
III	A Social Secretary	29
IV	Complications	42
V	Company Manners	57
VI	Hephzibah Comes to Life	78
VII	Day Dreams	94
VIII	The Rescue	109
IX	An Embarrassment of Riches	124
X	A Confession	140
XI	A Wilful Man Must Have His Way	155
XII	Hephzibah Turns the Tables	170
XIII	Congratulations Are in Order	184
XIV	Confidences	196
XV	Underneath the Bough	210
XVI	Miss Finch Follows a Classic Example	221
XVII	The Day of Judgment	235
XVIII	Warren Gets a Tip	249
XIX	The Worm Turns	264
XX	The Day After	276
XXI	Enlightenment	292
XXII	Fellow Travelers	305
XXIII	An Introduction	324





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CHAPTER I

BOARDERS WANTED

IT WAS too early in the season for lowered shades or closed shutters. The spring sunshine had taken possession of the big, many-windowed room, repaying the hospitality as other uninvited guests have been known to do, by its indiscreet revelations. In rooms much lived in, a rather endearing shabbiness is a familiar characteristic, suggestive, like a thumbed book, of homely comfort. The room in question had passed this stage and reached the shabbiness eloquent of poverty.

The paper on the walls was faded, and stained from a leak in the roof. The original carpet had been transformed into a rug that shrank annually and now showed threadbare areas, prophetic of gaping holes in the near future. The furniture, too,

though of expensive make, had arrived at a point where a series of surgical operations seemed imperative. Yet with it all, a certain plucky defiance was evident in the shabby room. Pictures or calendars hung over the discolored spots on the wall, furniture arranged to conceal the weak spots of the carpet, a crocheted shawl thrown carelessly over the exposed entrails of a veteran armchair, a general air of putting the best foot foremost inevitably suggested that the dilapidated building sheltered youth, ardent and unconquered.

In the smallest chair the room contained, a rocking chair that creaked protestingly under its light burden, sat Miss Zaida Finch, darning a pink silk stocking. Miss Finch's print dress modestly concealed her diminutive lower limbs, her extremely small shoes scarcely peeping from beneath its hem. For all that the eye discerned, her anatomical structure might have been modeled after that of Mrs. Shem in a Noah's ark. Yet with no evidence to substantiate his certainty, any observer would have vowed that Miss Finch's painstaking toil was wholly disinterested. It was impossible to believe that the much-mended pink silk hosiery formed part of her wardrobe.

The industry of Miss Finch was spasmodic. One moment she plied her needle with an intentness indicating that her task absorbed her. And again she let the stocking drop into her lap, and lost herself listening to sounds overhead, footsteps, doors opening and closing, the murmur of voices. Once, rising, she tiptoed to the window and gazed for a long breathless moment at the touring car before the gate, the chauffeur puffing a cigarette with an arrogance characteristic of the driver of a seven-passenger Packard, who knows that at any moment a Ford roadster may round the curve ahead.

Despite occasional lapses Miss Finch was darning industriously when the voices overhead sharpened noticeably. A light staccato of high heels tapping the uncarpeted staircase was followed by the slamming of a door violently enough to shake the building. Miss Finch, groping vainly for the interpretation of these sounds, found her gaze drawn to the window as the Packard swept along the highway, its horn bleating an impassioned farewell.

The door at the rear of Miss Finch's chair opened emphatically, with such emphasis indeed, that the door-knobs parted company, one falling into the hall, the other projecting itself in the direction of

Miss Finch as if with hostile intent. And close upon this demonstration a girl entered the room and flung herself into one of the ragged armchairs.

The owner of the pink silk stocking was revealed. It was all in keeping with her audacious color scheme. Her hair was obviously red, and instead of modestly disguising the fact, it used every known artifice to attract attention to itself, curling and crinkling and brazenly thrusting out tendril-like locks to catch the beholder's gaze. Her eyes should have been blue, according to all precedent, but instead they matched her hair, a daring reddish-brown, with yellow flecks like floating gold-leaf. Ordinarily her skin was creamy till the multiplying freckles of summer temporarily disguised its fairness, but at this moment some intense emotion dyed her crimson from her throat to the roots of her hair. Over a blue house dress she wore a sweater of vivid green, assumed, if the truth be told, not for the sake of warmth but to conceal her patched elbows. Her entrance into the room accentuated its faded dinginess and bleached Miss Finch to the color of ashes. Even the spring sunshine paled before her rainbow effect.

"Well, Fritz!" The girl used the incongruous

nickname with the carelessness of long custom. "It's all over."

"All over!" Miss Finch echoed in alarm. The darning egg dropped from her lap and spun dizzily upon the floor, while its owner blinked rapidly as if the radiant presence in the armchair dazzled her eyes.

"Yes. That was Mrs. Leavett, the one who saw my advertisement in the *Onlooker,* and wrote and engaged board for herself and two children."

Miss Finch rolled her eyes heavenward. Under the matter-of-fact statement she scented calamity.

"It occurred to her that she'd like to see the place before she came. And now she's seen it, she's not coming. She says my ad was misleading."

"It was a very good advertisement, I'm sure," protested Miss Finch. "I didn't know myself how pleasant the place was till you read me what you'd written."

The girl laughed out. The naive defense had the effect of partly dissipating her anger and bringing an evasive dimple into view.

"I leave it to you, Fritz, if I told a single whopper. I said the rooms were large and airy, and I didn't state that the paper was peeling off the walls.

I mentioned the lawn and the shade trees, and failed to add that the house needed painting. It is not the business of the seller, Fritzie dear, to call attention to any little defects in the article he is trying to dispose of. Mrs. Leavett overlooked that point. Not a business woman, evidently."

"The vines cover a good bit of the house anyway," commented Miss Finch resentfully. "What does a little paint more or less matter to a summer boarder?"

"Mrs. Leavett seemed under the impression that it mattered to her. She was so very snippy that at last I asked her if she didn't think that to be *un*-painted in these days was rather a mark of distinction. Since you didn't see the lady, Fritz, you can hardly appreciate the insinuating cleverness of that inquiry. The red, red rose has nothing on her. Such a lovely, fast-color carmine, warranted to go through a fainting fit without fading."

"If you're going to have boarders, Agatha," Miss Finch remonstrated, "you've got to keep a tight rein on your temper."

"I did, Fritz; I was preternaturally amiable till I saw that the game was up. Then I thought I might as well relieve my feelings. The woman seemed to

take it as an affront that I wasn't my own grandmother. She said for a girl of my age to advertise for boarders was a piece of presumption, and she wanted to know if I didn't have a guardian—as if I were weak-minded."

Miss Finch's contemptuous sniff breathed sympathetic scorn.

"I'm not ashamed of being only nineteen. Everybody has to be nineteen some time, except the people who die in infancy. As I said to Mrs. Leavett, if you're too young, time will mend it. But being too old isn't so easily remedied."

"Was *she* old?" inquired Miss Finch suspiciously.

"Older than she wants any one to think, Fritz. She's the sort of woman who talks about her little son when he's a sophomore in college, smoking an enormous meerschaum." Agatha's angry color had subsided to a becoming pink, and her eyes were luminous with mischief. "I'm going to try the frank, open style in ads, since the other doesn't seem to work. I shall want your opinion on it, Fritz, so prepare to give me your undivided attention." She flitted to the writing desk and began scribbling on the back of a convenient envelope and Miss Finch utilized the pause to recover her elusive darning egg,

dropping her thimble in the process. Before she could capture the latter runaway, Agatha was ready for her services as critic.

"Boarders wanted. A spinster aged nineteen, of uncertain temper, will accommodate a limited number of boarders at her country place, Oak Knoll. Rooms large and airy, special ventilation secured through openings in the roof. In case of rain, guests will be furnished with tubs to catch the drippings, without extra charge. Fine lawn kept in excellent order by the untiring efforts of two horses and a cow. View unsurpassed. Meals excellent provided the cook is kept in good humor by considerate treatment."

She nipped the handle of her pen reflectively. "Do you think it necessary to mention that the cook and the proprietor are one and the same?"

"Agatha," cried Miss Finch with the agonized earnestness of a literal mind, "you mustn't think of sending that to the paper. Taking boarders is a good deal like getting married. There's a whole lot you've got to keep dark, or you might as well give up first as last."

Her outburst terminated in a sniff. Immediately the tip of her pale, seemingly bloodless little nose became as red as a cherry, the instantaneous sequel of tears, with Miss Finch.

"You're so smart, Agatha," she quavered. "If only you'd sell this house and wash your hands of Howard and me, who haven't the least claim on you, you could go to the city and look around and like enough find a husband. There's plenty of men who don't mind red hair."

Agatha ignored the encouragement. "Howard is my brother."

"Just like children pretend in play. He's your stepma's son. There's not a drop of Kent blood in him, and not a mite of Sheldon in you. But instead of giving your mind to getting married like a girl needs to do in these days, you're all the time worrying about educating that boy."

"I'm going to send Howard to college if I live. I'd rather do that than have twenty husbands."

"Then if that wasn't enough," lamented Miss Finch tearfully, "here I am, a good-for-nothing cumberer of the ground, for you to fuss and plan for. Don't tell me! All the reason you keep this place is to have a home for me and Howard. And it ain't right or fair."

Agatha crumpled the advertisement inspired by the visit of Mrs. Leavett into an inky wad, and took aim at the spider-like blotch on the ceiling. Then

crossing the room swiftly, she hugged the limp little woman to her heart.

"You'll make me cry myself if you're not careful. You want to deprive me of my family and my chaperon at one swoop, and turn me out into the world a solitary orphan, you heartless creature." She silenced Miss Finch's gurgled protests with a kiss. "Hush!" she said authoritatively. "There comes Howard on the pony. He mustn't know anything about this."

The beat of hoofs ceased abruptly and a boy's swinging step sounded on the porch. To save the trouble of walking ten feet to the door, Howard raised the nearest window of the living-room, and made an unconventional entry. He was a handsome lad of sixteen, and Agatha's idol. She had been as ready as most young girls to resent her father's second marriage, but all her childish hostility vanished at the sequel, the chubby little boy who was her stepmother's contribution to the family circle. She had longed for a brother with the passionate yearning of a lonely child, and just when she had given up hope, a brother was hers. Agatha's sense of proprietorship had grown with the years. Nothing irritated her more than the suggestion that

the tie between Howard and herself was less binding than that of blood.

The boy drew three letters from his pocket, slapping them down on the table.

"You're getting to be pretty popular, Aggie. Every time I go to the village there's mail for you. Two letters yesterday and three to-day."

"How warm you look, Howard." Agatha pushed the boy's heavy hair back from his moist forehead. "You mustn't get overheated and take cold." She was deliciously maternal in her solicitude for the sturdy youngster who already topped her by an inch or two.

"I'll look warmer before the day's over. I'm going to tackle the garden now. If you'd ever seen summer boarders eat new green peas you'd know 'twas time to get busy."

Howard departed as he had come, and his sister, her face overcast, gave her attention to her mail. The first letter opened was flung petulantly to the floor.

"Woman wants to know how many bathrooms we have, and will I please send her the names of several former patrons as references. Worse than Mrs. Leavett."

"They're an unreasonable lot, summer boarders," acquiesced Miss Finch.

The second letter was as unsatisfactory, judging from the impetuosity of its flight across the room.

"She's the widow of a missionary and wants board at half rates, and the younger children not to count."

"I don't believe you've got the temper for running a boarding-house," commented Miss Finch. "You're as fiery as red pepper and next to the married state, keeping boarders calls for a saintly disposition."

Agatha prying open the third communication with a hairpin, vouchsafed no reply. But her perturbed air changed magically to breathless attention. Her eyes moved slowly down the typewritten page, her air of stupefaction increasingly in evidence. Checking herself with an impatient gesture, she started again at the beginning and read the letter aloud:

" 'My Dear Miss Kent:

" 'My attention has just been called to your advertisement in the current *Onlooker*. I can hardly hope that you remember me, for it is over twenty years since our last meeting, and at that time I was an insignificant urchin of twelve—' "

"Over twenty years," Miss Finch interjected, "and you nineteen last week."

" 'I remember you distinctly, however, and your beautiful old place with its fine grounds and noble trees. When I explain that I am the son of John Forbes you will understand that my visit with my father was a memorable occasion. He died soon after, as you remember, but he often spoke of our week at Oak Knoll and his affectionate admiration for yourself.' "

A flicker of understanding illumined Miss Finch's blank face.

"I'm beginning to see daylight," she interrupted. "The man's fooled by the likeness of names. He thinks he's writing to your great-aunt, Agatha Kent. She'd be between sixty and seventy if she were living."

Agatha had already solved the puzzle. She nodded and read on, too interested to pause for discussion:

" 'I have played in rather hard luck recently. I contracted a severe form of malaria in my South American trip last year which has resulted, strangely enough, in a loss of eyesight, only temporary, the doctors hope. For six months I have gone about with my eyes bandaged. At present the building up of my general health seems the most important step in my recovery and I wish to secure board in some retired country place with a bracing climate, like that of Bridgewater.

" 'In case you were willing to burden yourself

with a blind boarder, I should, of course, insist on paying more than the moderate rates mentioned in your ad. I should also wish to engage the services of some youth in the neighborhood who could serve as valet and companion. I could bring an attendant from the city but would prefer a country boy, who would not be continually pining for roof gardens and like diversions. His work will be exacting, of course, for no child is as helpless as I, but I will pay well in addition to his board and will try to make his labors as agreeable as possible.

"'I have written at length because I wish you to understand just what you are letting yourself in for, if you admit me to Oak Knoll. The remembrance of your benevolent face which even to my unobservant boy self seemed to express your kindly nature, is my only reason for thinking that possibly your answer will be favorable.

"'Yours very truly,

"'BURTON FORBES.'"

Mechanically Agatha folded the letter and returned it to its envelope. She spoke in a rapturous half whisper. "A blind man. If it had been planned on purpose, it couldn't have been more perfect. Please don't tell me I'm dreaming, Fritz."

Miss Finch rubbed her nose fretfully, a sign of perturbation. "Have you thought—"

"He can't see that the paper is peeling off the wall," Agatha continued ecstatically. "But he'll ap-

preciate the rooms being large and airy. He won't worry because the house needs painting, but he can enjoy sitting under the shade of the trees. I can even feed him fried chicken while the rest of us are eating cod-fish gravy. It's an interposition of Providence."

Miss Finch was hectoring her nose again. "But how are you going to manage—"

"He wants a boy as an attendant," persisted Agatha jubilantly. "Howard is the boy. He'll pay him well, and pay me for his board. If only I'm not delirious. Oh, I want to jump and scream. Howard's next year in school is all provided for. And if Mr. What's-his-name would only stay blind till—"

"I guess you're forgetting one thing." Miss Finch raised her voice challengingly. "You ain't your great-aunt."

Agatha regarded the interruption with irritation. "Well!"

"It's her he wants to board with. He imagines she's a nice, motherly old soul, who'll pet him up and feed him up. It ain't likely he'd think of engaging board with a flighty young girl. I don't say

you're not as competent as though you were sixty. But he wouldn't believe it."

The glow illuminating the girl's face flickered defiantly under this chilling blast of common sense, and went out, like a candle in the wind. She drew her arched brows into a meditative pucker and sat musing while Miss Finch, humanly complacent over having suggested a difficulty, gave her whole attention to her darning, leaving Agatha to wrestle with the solution.

"Fritz," the girl breathed at last, "do you believe in reincarnation?"

Miss Finch tried to look as if she understood the meaning of the word. With an adroitness for which few would have given her credit, she replied, "I won't say I do, and I won't say I don't."

"Well, it's true, Fritz. I am my own great-aunt."

"Land alive!" cried Miss Finch, startled into close attention.

"Mr. Burton Forbes wants to engage board for the summer with Miss Agatha Kent. Well, I'm Agatha Kent. He imagines that I'm a nice comfortable old lady with white hair and a double chin. Very well. It would be a hard heart that would disappoint a blind man in such a trifle."

"You mean," gasped Miss Finch, "that you're going to deceive him?"

"Heaven forbid. But I'm not going to *un*deceive him, Fritz. He assumed certain things about me. Let him keep his illusions, poor soul. He'll spend a happy summer with his father's old friend, and then go away and recover, I hope."

No trace of Agatha's shadowing perplexity remained. Her eyes had the mischievous brightness of a naughty child's. Miss Finch gazed aghast.

"He's bound to find out sooner or later. And no good comes of cheating anybody, least of all a blind man."

"You're not the stuff for a conspirator, I can see that," Agatha laughed. "You look positively frightened. But Howard will be delighted. He'll feel like the hero of a detective story."

The window by which her brother had made his exit was still open and Agatha took her departure in the same informal fashion. But little Miss Finch sat bowed in her chair, as if the responsibility for this newly hatched plot rested upon her narrow shoulders, and crushed her under its weight.

CHAPTER II

THE CURTAIN RISES

THE composition of a suitable reply to Burton Forbes' request proved unexpectedly difficult. Agatha did not lack appreciation of the histrionic demands of her rôle. She suspected the late John Forbes of something more than a platonic admiration for her imaginary self and it was out of the question to write his son the matter-of-fact letter which would have sufficed for another blind man, desiring board in the country. As she composed laborious missives only to destroy them on the second reading, Agatha thanked heaven that the hardships of her lot had not included the adoption of a literary career.

The completed letter, however, so far met her exacting requirements that in satisfied contemplation of her intellectual offspring, she forgot the pangs attending its birth. With a naive complacency not unfamiliar among the craft, she read the masterpiece to Miss Finch:

"My Dear Mr. Forbes:

"Your letter, just received, both surprised and touched me. Your memory must, indeed, be tenacious if you recall me, for in the twenty years which have passed since your visit to Oak Knoll you have, I am sure, seen much better worth remembering than a quiet, old country woman the best of whose life is now its golden memories.

"I hardly need tell you that my door would be open to your father's son under any circumstances, and the fact of your blindness—which I sincerely trust will prove temporary—only makes you doubly welcome. Fortunately I know exactly the person for your attendant, a young friend of mine named Howard Sheldon. He is thoroughly reliable and the salary will be a great help to him, as he is ambitious for an education.

"Please let me know when to expect you. I am looking forward to renewing the friendship begun so long ago that it almost seems as if it must have been in another state of existence.

"Very truly yours,
"Agatha Kent."

Miss Finch did not share Agatha's enthusiasm. Her pinched little face was wan and worried as she conscientiously did her best to dampen the satisfaction of the proud author.

"That letter gives me a dreadful upset feeling, Agatha. I don't know as I could put my finger on a downright lie, but it certainly ain't true."

"It is the truth and nothing but the truth, Fritzie. It is ridiculous for a little four-page letter to claim to be the whole truth. Take, for instance, the fact about his being doubly welcome because he is blind. That's truer than he has any idea of."

"'Golden memories,'" quoted Miss Finch with severity. "A young girl like you!"

"That's the best thing in the letter," cried Agatha, enraptured. "I don't know how I ever came to think of anything so clever. 'Golden memories,'" she repeated with the sentimental inflection she deemed appropriate. "Do you know, Fritz, I don't believe it's as hard to write books as the authors make out."

Disappointing as Miss Finch proved in the rôle of conspirator, Howard's enthusiasm largely compensated for her deficiencies. Howard was in his element. To share in a plot of this character was rapture beyond words. The only drawback to his happiness was the fact that Agatha had described him to his prospective employer as a reliable boy, ambitious for an education. Howard felt that to live up to such a character promised an insipid summer. It would have added a tang to existence had he been cast for a refugee or a cowboy. It was with

difficulty that Agatha brought him to relinquish his determination to play some sort of part.

"I could pretend to be an awfully ignorant cuss, don't you know, Aggie. I could say 'betcher life' instead of 'yes,' and, 'not on your tintype' for 'no.' "

Yielding to his sister's eloquent representations, Howard reluctantly consented to confine himself to his normal mode of expression during Mr. Forbes' stay and bend all his energy toward furthering his sister's success in the impersonation fate demanded of her. His suggestions proved an almost startling range of ingenuity. Agatha was to complain frequently of rheumatic pains in her knees, and keep a cane handy for strolling about the grounds. Another point on which Howard placed great emphasis was the necessity of frequently mislaying her supposedly indispensable spectacles.

"He'll be sure to suspect something," insisted Howard, "if you don't keep losing your spectacles. Old folks always do. 'And when I find them and bring them to you, you must always say that they are the ones you use for looking far off and you want your reading glasses."

The exchange of several letters between Burton

Forbes and his prospective hostess resulted in an arrangement entirely satisfactory from Agatha's standpoint. Her boarder was to make the trip from the city without an attendant. Howard would meet him at the station with the carryall and convey him to Oak Knoll, where Agatha would make him welcome as the son of a friend long dead. The possibility of Mr. Forbes' enlightenment through the interference of neighbors she had met with characteristic decision by disseminating the information that her home was to serve as temporary asylum for a blind gentleman, broken in health and with an unconquerable aversion to society. Without definitely reflecting on Mr. Forbes' mental condition, Agatha succeeded in conveying the impression that any one attempting to interview her blind boarder would do so at his own risk.

Youthful audacity, together with a daring peculiar to herself, carried Agatha triumphantly through the successive stages of preparation. It was not until Howard had actually driven to the station to meet the expected arrival that she began to appreciate her own temerity in committing herself to so reckless a scheme. To be an old lady for an entire summer, to be discreet and dignified—sufficiently so at least

to deceive a blind man—began to seem to her a contract impossible to carry out. Her knees weakened under her. An abnormal acceleration of her pulses convinced her that she was more frightened than she was willing to admit. As the time approached for Howard's return, she was almost on the point of offering a prayer that Mr. Forbes had suddenly decided on a summer in Canada.

The carryall drawn by the leisurely bays came in sight just when apprehension was reaching the point of panic. Agatha strained her eyes. Howard occupied the driver's place and in the comparative obscurity of the back seat the outlines of a masculine figure were visible. Her throat dry and her forehead unpleasantly moist, Agatha went out upon the piazza to receive her guest.

Under ordinary circumstances Howard's passenger would not have seemed a formidable personage. In spite of the disfiguring blue goggles, his clear-cut features were distinctly prepossessing. Moreover, his air of helplessness would have appealed to the maternal instinct of any female five years old, and led her to constitute herself his protector. Only a guilty conscience accounted for the shrinking with which Agatha advanced to welcome him.

"How do you do, Mr. Forbes." She spoke in the repressed tones she imagined befitting age, and her fluttering heart imparted a suitable *tremolo* to the greeting.

Forbes snatched off his hat and put out a groping hand. His abundant brown hair, cut severely close, showed a well-shaped head. His voice, too, was in his favor.

"Have I the pleasure—"

"I am Miss Kent." Agatha took his hand and quickly released it. "Bring Mr. Forbes' suit-case, Howard. I suppose you'd like to go to your room, Mr. Forbes. Shall I help you?"

She put her hand through his arm to guide him, her face aflame. Yet her youthful zest for adventure was asserting itself and there was something contagious in Howard's delight over actually embarking on the anticipated conspiracy. Agatha's breathing steadied. She caught Howard's eye and flashed a smile at him. The experience was like a plunge into a mountain stream, exhilarating after the first shock was over.

"This is very good of you, Miss Kent," Forbes was saying as they ascended the wide staircase, side by side. "I shan't be quite so helpless as this when

I've once got my bearings." His voice took on an interrogative note. "I hardly suppose you would have known me?"

Agatha threw him an appreciative glance. "I think it would be out of the question for any one who had known you to forget you."

"Really?" He seemed pleased. "But surely I have changed."

"In twenty years? Certainly. Even I"—she smiled in enjoyment of her own daring—"even I have changed since your last visit."

Howard, on the stairs behind them, coughed loudly by way of applause, but Agatha's complacency was destined to be jarred. "Don't make rash claims," the new arrival said severely, "I feel you're nothing but a girl."

"I—I—"

"At least that is how you impressed me the first time I saw you—the only time I've seen you," Forbes corrected, "as if you would never grow old."

Agatha made a quick recovery. "I try to keep a young heart," she replied demurely. "Now, Mr. Forbes, remember that when you get to the top of the stairs you turn toward the front of the house, and the door of your room is the first on your right."

The big front room for all its appalling shabbiness, was deliciously airy. Forbes stood between the open windows and drew deep breaths. "This is what I've been pining for without knowing it," he burst out. "I have a presentiment that this air is going to be just the tonic I need, and that I'll be seeing again in a week or two."

"I hope—so," lied Agatha with the jerkiness of one unused to falsehood. "Howard, get Mr. Forbes everything he needs and bring him down to the porch when he is ready, unless he would like to lie down." She withdrew sedately and then atoned for her unnatural repression by galloping down the stairs and falling upon Miss Finch, who, having viewed the arrival from a convenient window, had withdrawn to her own little rocking chair, a prey to lugubrious forebodings.

The panting Agatha revealed no traces of her late misgivings. "It's ridiculously easy, Fritz, and the greatest fun. I believe I'd have made a star actress. I honestly felt as old as the hills, exactly as if he were a young fellow I'd known years ago, when he was a little boy. I was almost tempted to smooth back his hair from his forehead—he has such a

nice thoughtful forehead, Fritz—and imprint a benevolent kiss above his nose."

"Yes, I saw he was nice-looking," sighed Miss Finch. "Such a pity he can't see. I've often thought I wouldn't mind marrying a blind man or a cripple and sacrificing my entire life to making him happy. But I'm afraid you'd tire of it, Agatha."

"I'm sure I should. It makes me tired even to think of such a thing," admitted Agatha shamelessly. "But you don't get my point of view, Fritz. The kiss was to have been maternal or even grandmotherly. He thinks I am an old lady and in spite of everything, I regard myself from his standpoint. I never looked forward to a summer so much in all my life. It'll be like going to a play morning, noon and night."

Voices sounded on the stairs, a man's deep notes blending pleasantly with the fresh tones of a growing lad. Agatha seized Miss Finch's arm.

"Come out and meet him, Fritz. And I believe I'll begin calling you Zaida. You're considerably younger than I, you know. Why, what's the matter?"

Terror in her eyes, Miss Finch was resisting the

friendly propulsion. "I'm afraid to go near him. I'll be letting the cat out of the bag, and I'm not going to have lies on my conscience even for you, Agatha."

With a laugh the girl released her. "Poor old Fritz, you never were intended for a diplomatic career. But you'll get used to it. Train yourself to think of me as some one venerable and stately, long, long past the follies of youth." She advanced to the door with a dancing step borrowed from Mrs. Vernon Castle as depicted on the screen, turned to kiss her hand to the crushed Miss Finch, and disappeared in the direction of the kitchen. And presently, mingling with the composite fragrance of the garden and distant hay-fields, the appreciative nostrils of Mr. Burton Forbes differentiated the less esthetic but equally delectable odor of frying chicken.

CHAPTER III

A SOCIAL SECRETARY

IN NINETEEN observant years Agatha had noted a business man's invariable interest in the local telegraph service, and the tendency of lovers to be dissatisfied with the mail facilities of the neighborhood. The concern manifested by Burton Forbes on learning that the Rural Free Delivery called at Oak Knoll but once a day, classified him definitely, in Agatha's estimation.

"You can always send Howard to the village for the afternoon mail," she suggested, the new warmth in her voice an unconscious demonstration of the truth that all the world loves a lover.

"Thanks, that's fine!" The brightening of Forbes' face quite offset his immediate conscientious warning that she was not to spoil him just because she was sorry for him.

As the Rural Free Delivery brought nothing of consequence on the morning following Forbes' arrival, Howard was despatched to the village after

the midday meal, leaving Forbes in Agatha's care. Agatha conducted her charge to a creaking rocking chair, in the shadiest angle of the porch, and shoved a foot-stool near. "Now I'll get my knitting," she said blithely, "and we'll talk."

Forbes seemed delighted. "It's too good to be true," he murmured. "I thought they were extinct, the old ladies who sat knitting. It's like stepping into the heart of an old-fashioned story."

Agatha smiled tolerantly. "It's clear you're just back from South America. Up here everybody's knitting, young and old."

"But not like you," he insisted. "I am sure you have an air about it that differentiates your knitting from all this kittenish frolicking with balls of yarn." He turned his wistful face toward her as if it helped to visualize the picture, and then added, "Just the hour for confidences, isn't it?"

Agatha smiled at the dun colored wool in her lap. "A warm day, a cool porch, an old lady knitting, and a young man in love. Of course it's ideal for confidences."

He did not seem in any hurry to take advantage of the opening he had asked for. "I'm afraid I'm going to impose on you," he said, after so long a

pause that she wondered whether he were planning to deny her charge. "Howard is a bright kid, and I'm sure he'll prove a satisfactory secretary, but there are a few letters I'd hate to dictate to a boy." He laughed with rather an engaging air of shyness as he added, "I imagine it won't be particularly easy to dictate them even to you."

"Of course not," agreed Agatha, with ready sympathy. "Love-letters seem one's own business more than almost anything in the world." His artless confidences had brought a lovely color to her cheeks. Practical as Agatha believed herself, she was romance-hungry, and it did not matter in the least that in this particular love-affair she was cast for a minor rôle. "And I'll read you her letters, too," she offered joyously. "It will save Howard some trying experiences. Howard's just at the age when he's horribly embarrassed by anything in the shape of sentiment."

"Thank you. I'd any amount rather you read them," returned Forbes gratefully. "But they won't be sentimental letters, at all. Howard could read them without finding a word that would bring a blush to his maiden cheek."

"Oh!" observed Agatha blankly, and knitted to

the end of her needle without speaking. Apparently the path that had seemed so plain led nowhere, after all.

Forbes, too, seemed in no haste to speak. "Of course," he explained at last, "I'm very hopeful. If I make a complete recovery as the doctors tell me I'm likely to do, there's no reason why things shouldn't be as they were before."

Agatha laid down her knitting and regarded him fixedly, an upright crease between her brows. The tranquillity of his unconscious face gave the impression that she must have misunderstood him. "How were they before?" she asked bluntly.

Apparently he did not question her right to a categorical answer. "We had planned to be married in January till this came up. But of course I couldn't hold a girl like Julia when there's a possibility of my having to grope my way through life."

"No, of course not," agreed Agatha, with misleading calm. "But if she were enough in love with you to plan to marry you in January, I should suppose something would hold her, something you had nothing to do with."

There was a moment of rather tense silence. Then Forbes laughed out boyishly:

"You dear old soul," he cried, "you don't know how mid-Victorian that sounds. When you were a girl, women took all that sentimental stuff seriously; about sacrificing themselves for love, I mean. But you don't understand the modern girl. She's beyond that."

"I don't pretend to understand your Julia," agreed Agatha, her eyes aflame, "I don't want to."

Forbes laughed again, this time with a reservation in his mirth. "Look here," he said, "you mustn't criticize Julia, for then I can't talk to you about her, and that would be a deuced bore. And she's a queen. A girl of that sort is bound to know her value. Julia was really fond of me, not desperately in love as I was—as I am—that wasn't to be expected, but really fond of me and inclined to exaggerate ridiculously my small achievements. But of course it's out of the question for her to marry me if the rest of my life is to be a game of Blind Man's Buff."

"Per—perhaps so," Agatha stammered. One of her ready rages was coming on. She felt it distinctly. One familiar symptom was that her blood seemed boiling in her veins, and her ears felt hot and swollen. She had seen them before when she was angry, flaming like two danger signals, and

tempering the redness of her hair. Her shaking hands made knitting quite impossible. "Of course people can't marry if they haven't the money to marry on," she succeeded in saying finally, in an unsteady voice, "but there's nothing to keep them from loving each other till they die, and having that comfort, anyway."

She had succeeded in making him very uncomfortable. She would have known that by the way the rocking chair was creaking as he squirmed, even if his astonished face had not borne witness to the facts in the case.

"It— it is not a question of money," he explained stiffly. "I have plenty, and so has she. We're not extravagant in our tastes, either of us. The thing that's out of the question—" He seemed to find a little difficulty in making it clear, after all, and floundered at this point. "You can't think of it," he protested angrily, "tying a girl like Julia, a beautiful, queenly creature, to a man who has to be led around like a poodle dog. God! I couldn't be coward enough to accept such a sacrifice."

"Oh, I understand, now." Agatha's anger was past the inarticulate stage. She pulled a needle from her knitting, and brandished it dangerously as she

talked. "You mean that you wouldn't *let* her be engaged to you." The affected innocence of her voice was flatly contradicted by the bitterness of her eyes. "You just insisted that there shouldn't be anything more between you two till you were sure that your eyes were going to be all right again. Well, I tell you frankly that I think you've treated Julia brutally, and that she has a right to detest you."

Apparently Mr. Forbes was losing confidence in his ability to make the matter clear. He sighed patiently as he tried again.

"No, that isn't it. We were agreed perfectly on the subject. Love isn't quite so reckless a passion as it was when you were young, Miss Kent. Julia and I belong to a reasonable generation, tremendously matter-of-fact. She was really cut up over the whole affair, but she felt she owed it to herself to break the engagement since my future was so uncertain, and I felt I owed it to her to release her. So we were perfectly agreed, you see."

"Yes, I see." Agatha was glaring at him with the expression of a vixen. "Just as businesslike as if you had been planning to go into partnership to raise chickens, weren't you? And so that's what the modern girl is like. Dear me!"

The edge to her voice made her irritation sufficiently plain, and Forbes, with a gentle deference that touched her, changed the topic to one unlikely to combat her old-fashioned prejudices. They were discussing Thackeray and George Eliot when Howard returned. Swinging himself from his pony, the boy came clattering along the porch, and deposited a package of mail on his employer's knees.

"It's lucky I went over," Howard declared. "You've got a regular windfall, five or six letters beside the things with one-cent stamps."

In spite of Mr. Forbes' assumption of ultra-modern reasonableness, his countenance betrayed a boyish ardor that added to Agatha's resentment against the recreant Julia. She took possession of the letters, saying to her brother, "You'd better put the pony up, hadn't you, Howard? I'll attend to Mr. Forbes' mail."

Her boarder only waited for the beat of the pony's hoofs to tell that Howard was out of hearing, before he leaned toward her, his face pathetically eager, "Is there one from her?"

"What's the post-mark?"

"She's probably at the Briercliff Manor, this week. She writes a striking hand, not the old-time

idea of feminine, but full of character and strength. You'll always recognize it after you've seen it once."

Unfortunately it appeared that Agatha's education in this important branch of knowledge was not to begin immediately. There was no letter from Julia. This fact established, the light went out of Forbes' face, and it remained blank during the reading of several communications of varying degrees of interest. For the first time he seemed an embodiment of all the pitiful helplessness of the blind.

"I suppose," he ventured hesitatingly, when she had finished, "that you're too busy to take a letter for me to-day. Got to go on with that knitting, haven't you?"

Agatha longed to say yes. In her present mood, to transcribe an impassioned letter to the object of Forbes' regard, seemed well-nigh intolerable. Inexorably she forced herself to reply that she was not in the least busy. "I'll get Howard out of the way by sending him to the garden," she added. "He'll be perfectly willing to change jobs with me."

Howard, who had the average boy's aversion to the use of a pen, bore out her statement and joyfully agreed to picking peas in place of acting as an amanuensis. He went his way, favoring her with

an almost ribald wink, a natural reaction from the profound respect he was now required to show her. With an expression that would have befitted Queen Elizabeth, when signing the death-warrant of Lady Jane Grey, Agatha began her task.

Forbes' mood, though disappointed, was not reproachful. His pale face flushing slightly at the novel experience of giving voice to such tender sentiments in the presence of a third person, he dictated the letter with only those pauses necessary to enable Agatha to keep pace with him.

"My Dearest Girl:

"The afternoon mail has just been brought from the village, and I was disappointed at not receiving a letter from you. Disappointed I am, but not surprised, for I am sure that wherever you are, you will have little time to yourself unless you take it by main force, so to speak. That is the penalty I pay for being in love with one so charming.

"I wish you could look in on me here, at the home of my father's old friend, Miss Agatha Kent. Oak Knoll is a fine old place. The house is spacious, comfortable and homelike, the last characteristic doubtless due to the personality of the owner. As Miss Kent is good enough to write this for me, I must wait some other opportunity to tell you how delightful I find her. Her type is disappearing, unluckily, which makes me all the more ready to

congratulate myself on this chance of renewing a friendship which might almost be regarded as an inheritance.

"The troublesome eyes pained me a little last night, but lying awake was not altogether fruitless, as in the stillness I could bring your dear face before me almost as vividly as if I saw it in the flesh. To-day I feel much better. I am convinced that this wonderful air is going to make me over, and then in a few weeks I shall again have a right to indulge myself in the dreaming of those dreams which need no Daniel to interpret them."

Forbes' deep voice came to a halt at this point. He turned his face toward Agatha, the involuntary movement showing that his blindness was not of long duration, and smiled with that winsome boyishness which made it impossible to believe him past thirty.

"I believe I'll take my pen in hand for the wind-up, if you please, Miss Kent. I think I can manage a line or two, without making it illegible."

She brought the sheet to him, put the pen in his hand, and indicated where he was to begin to write. And then suddenly as she watched him, the outline of his fine profile was blurred by angry tears. Something in his expression gave her an inkling of the tenderness compressed in those few straggling lines,

and all for the girl who had "owed it to herself" to break her engagement because of his misfortune.

"She owes it to herself to break with him," reflected Agatha, "but she doesn't owe it to him to make it final, and give him a chance to get over it. Oh, no! He can go on to the end of his life dreaming about her, and making love to her, and feeding her vanity by his devotion. And then he calls that deliberate heartlessness reasonable, and makes himself believe that she's the type of the modern girl. The cat!"

Agatha's righteous indignation was getting the best of her. She said the last two words aloud.

"Beg pardon!" Forbes turned, showing a puzzled face.

"The cat is rather near the chickens," Agatha explained. "If you'll excuse me, I'll run down and drive her away." She started at a pace which would have been reckless for rheumatic knees, recalled herself, and slowed down till beyond his hearing. Then she stood quite still and stamped her foot upon the gravel like a restive horse, till she felt better.

When she returned, flushed but calm, the letter was completed and folded. "Haven't any asbestos

envelopes, have you?" questioned Forbes, trying to make a joke out of his bit of sentiment. "I've made it hot stuff, I assure you." And then he acknowledged that an ordinary envelope would probably retain his ardent effusion without bursting into flame, and Agatha wrote the name she already hated, eying each letter malevolently, as she set it down:

MISS JULIA STUDLEY
BRIERCLIFF MANOR
BRIERCLIFF, NEW YORK

Howard took her aside that night to thank her for relieving him of an obnoxious task. "It's the only part of the work I mind, writing those darned letters. Does he make 'em long?"

"A great deal too long," said Agatha, "and I don't blame you for hating that job. It's rotten."

CHAPTER IV

COMPLICATIONS

FOR a week Forbes' spirits were fitful. Morning after morning, the Rural Free Delivery brought a variety of offerings, and disappointment along with the rest. Each afternoon Howard rode to the village, and though he never returned empty-handed, he might as well have done so, since he failed to bring the right letter. Had it not been for Agatha, Forbes' depression might easily have become serious. She spent with him all the time she could spare, even shelling peas and whipping cream upon the porch within arm's length of his chair. Whatever opinion he expressed, she promptly disagreed. She railed at modern institutions. She professed unbounded contempt for the modern girl. She was as prickly as a chestnut burr, as puckery as an unripe persimmon, as ruffling as a January gale. But she gained her point. Forbes did not mope.

In that week of waiting, she wrote at his dictation

three letters to Julia, all of them ardently tender, and quite uncomplaining. Though he confessed to disappointment over not hearing from her, he did not seem to question that it was her privilege to keep him waiting her pleasure. His humility aroused Agatha to a fury of protest. She dotted her "i's" as if she were stabbing the paper, and crossed her "t's" with a sweep, like the slash of a knife. Her valorous instinct to champion the cause of the under dog had never been so constantly in evidence.

The table at Oak Knoll was extremely good that week. In addition to distracting Forbes' thoughts by continually opposing him, Agatha concentrated her attention on making him eat. The fundamental common sense, underlying like granite her girlish caprices and audacity, assured her that an aching heart was in some mysterious fashion relieved by a full stomach. The price Forbes had insisted on paying for his board had seemed to her excessive, and now it justified her in trying her choicest recipes. And while Forbes' mood would have made it easy for him to be quite indifferent to what was set before him, thanks to these tactics he ate with a rather shamefaced relish, and assured Agatha that cooks of her sort had all been born before the Civil War.

At the end of a trying week, the looked-for letter arrived. Agatha herself took it from the mail box at the end of the long drive, and she eyed it as if it had been a new species of noxious insect. Though she had never seen Julia's chirography, she instantly recognized it, even without the aid of the post-mark. The letter was a long one, evidently, for it had called for double postage.

Agatha walked rapidly back to the house, congratulating herself that her duties would be less onerous, at least till the stimulating effect of this letter had worn away. She beckoned to Howard, who was escorting Forbes about the grounds on his morning constitutional, and despatched him on some unnecessary errand, while she took his place at Forbes' side. "It's come," she said briefly.

Though terse, the statement was quite intelligible. Forbes put out his hand eagerly, and she saw it was trembling. She gave him the letter, conscious of a pity that had a mixture of contempt. "Shall I read it to you?" she asked.

"Why, of course. What am I thinking of! Shall we go to the porch? It seems like a fat fellow, and I don't want to keep you standing."

Agatha put her hand through his arm and steered him in the direction of the house. She noticed the shadow on his face had lifted. A little color had come to his cheeks, and his sensitive mouth seemed on the point of smiling. She felt that she despised his weakness in letting himself be played upon by the caprices of a heartless girl, but at the same time, she wanted to cry. And Forbes, as if suspecting her mood, entertained her as they walked, by making fun of himself and of the rapture he could not hide.

"What do you think, Miss Kent? Will you be equal to reading this to me every day till the next one comes?"

"I suppose," said Agatha with resignation, "that I can stand it if you can."

"Oh, there won't be any difficulty as far as I'm concerned. In fact, if my eyes were normal, I should probably read it several times a day, whenever I had a minute to spare. But I haven't the nerve to impose on you to that extent."

"Heaven forbid!" cried Agatha devoutly, and he broke into hilarious laughter. Agatha reflected that if this was the result of falling in love, the longer that catastrophe was postponed, the better.

Forbes had been quite correct in saying that Julia's letter would not be sentimental. Howard could have read it without the slightest embarrassment. She apologized casually for not having written earlier, and by way of explanation gave a list of her engagements for the past two weeks, a device which lent her letter the effect of the society column in a Sunday newspaper, and accounted for the double postage. The names of several men appeared frequently in her record, and it was evident that Forbes was not the only one of his sex to recognize her charm. She even quoted one or two compliments she had received, as if certain of his sympathetic pleasure in her popularity, and his expression as he listened seemed to justify her confidence.

On the last page of the fifteen, Julia detached herself from this fascinating theme, and touched on his affairs. She was glad he was better and she was sure he must enjoy Oak Knoll. She thought those old colonial houses simply lovely and from his description, Miss Kent was a perfect dear. It was good of him to write so often for she was always glad to hear, and she was very cordially his friend, Julia.

Agatha laid down the letter, hardly able to keep

back the scornful comment that rushed to her lips like a hemorrhage. She was rather in hopes Forbes would say it himself. The shallowness of the missive, its unabashed vanity, its colossal selfishness were so apparent to her intelligence that she half expected to have Forbes break the silence by congratulating himself on his escape from marrying Julia in January. With this thought in her mind, the fatuous complacency indicated by Forbes' tone came in the nature of a shock.

"She's a bit irregular as a correspondent, but when she does write, you see it's some letter."

Agatha digested this in silence.

"You can gather from this," continued the unconscious Mr. Forbes, "how popular she is. Wherever she goes, she's the center of attention."

Since it gave him pleasure to continue in this strain, and Agatha was not really hard-hearted, she composed herself to listen till Howard's return. But the sight of her brother's slender figure in the distance was peculiarly welcome. By dint of vehement gestures, she induced him to exchange his sauntering gait for a run, and so shortened her ordeal perceptibly.

Howard looked from the frowning girl to the

smiling young man with perplexity. For several days Forbes' depression had weighed on the boy's spirits. And now Mr. Forbes was grinning like a chessy cat, and Aggie looked mad enough to bite a nail in two. Howard continued to stare till by a sweeping gesture Agatha indicated her wish to be left to herself. For some time Forbes had gone through the program of exercise his physician had outlined with a listlessness which proved his lack of interest. Now as Howard suggested continuing their interrupted walk, he clapped the boy on the shoulder, seized his arm and the two went off laughing. And Agatha, recalling his boast that he was a representative of a generation remarkable for its reasonableness, smiled sourly and significantly after his departing figure, and asked herself whether all men were fools, or only the nice ones.

In her valiant effort to sustain Forbes' spirits, Agatha had for some days neglected her household duties, and she profited by his temporary accession of cheerfulness to despatch a number of pressing duties, aided by Phemie Tidd, the daughter of a neighboring farmer. The most notable characteristic of Phemie was her stupidity, and though Agatha had sometimes found this trying, in the

present emergency she derived satisfaction from the certainty that nature had rendered it impossible for Phemie to find out anything on her own initiative. Whether she was positively weak-minded or not was a question on which the community did not agree, but under careful supervision she accomplished rather more work than would have seemed possible, considering her mental equipment.

As there was no immediate prospect of another letter from Julia, Howard was excused from his afternoon trips to the village, and left to discharge his secretarial duties unassisted. For this reason Agatha was several hours late in learning an important bit of news. It was approaching noon on Friday when she came out upon the porch flushed and weary, after a strenuous morning, and dropped into a chair near that which Forbes was occupying. Though the young man was alone, his mood was evidently cheerful. As she approached him, his smile challenged her attention, and she pondered with frank amazement on the extraordinary effect of Julia's inane letter.

"It's Miss Kent, isn't it?" Forbes looked boyishly pleased over having guessed correctly. "I am beginning to enjoy some of the perquisites of blind-

ness. I can recognize the footsteps of all of you. Do you know you walk with wonderful lightness for a woman of your age?"

Agatha immediately resolved to begin wearing a pair of Howard's slippers, which could be kept on only by dragging her feet.

"I've been wanting to see you all the morning," continued Forbes light-heartedly. "I've great news for you. We're going to have company."

"Company!" Had Forbes' sense of hearing reached the stage of acuteness he fondly imagined, he would have recognized instantly a note of wildness in Agatha's exclamation.

"Had a letter this morning from a pal of mine, fellow I knew in college. He's coming to-morrow to spend Sunday with me."

"To spend Sunday!" Even though Forbes was unable to perceive the frozen horror of Agatha's countenance, her appalled tone convinced him that something was wrong. His smile gave way to an expression of anxiety.

"It won't inconvenience you to put him up, will it, Miss Kent?"

Agatha found herself unable to reply. Her cas-

tle in the air was about to topple. A friend of Forbes was coming, and he would be as eyes to the blind. Through him Forbes would learn that the house was in need of painting and shingling and papering, that the furniture was in all stages of dilapidation, and that she herself was not an elderly lady with a motherly interest in youth, but a mere girl with a surprising facility in falsehood. And while these agonized forebodings flitted through her brain, Forbes was offering dismayed apologies.

"I beg your pardon a thousand times. I should have realized— Of course, this isn't a boarding-house, but the fact that you advertised for boarders, misled me, don't you see? If Warren's coming is going to put you out at all, I'll have Howard telegraph him at once."

Agatha came to herself. There was risk, of course, in granting permission for his friend's visit, yet anything was better, even discovery, than that she should appear inhospitable. Her cheeks grew hot as she recalled his generosity and saw him confused and apologetic over having asked a friend to solace his loneliness for a week-end.

"Indeed you shall do nothing of the kind," she

said with authority. "You didn't understand me. I'm only sorry not to meet your friend. I expect to be away over Sunday."

"Oh, but that's bad. I particularly wanted Warren to see you. We might telegraph him to make it Sunday week."

Agatha vetoed the suggestion. It was better that Mr. Warren should come as he had planned. "And besides," she added with swift return of her normal audacity, "if he is here you won't miss me so much."

"I shall miss you under any and all circumstances, dear lady." Forbes' air of animation had returned, and it was so great a relief to see him smiling again, that she resolutely shut her eyes to the pitfalls ahead.

"I shall get a girl from the neighborhood to do the cooking," explained Agatha. "And Miss Finch will mother you all in my place."

"But not in your way." Forbes had a confused but unflattering impression of Miss Finch, due to the fact that she never dared trust herself to converse with him for more than a minute at a time, for fear of making some unfortunate revelation. "And I'm sorry," he ended regretfully, "that Warren's not to taste your cooking."

"Oh, Hephzibah is exactly as good. I trained her."

"Good heavens! You don't mean there's a living woman with a name like that."

"Oh, do you think Hephzibah an odd name? It wasn't uncommon when I was a girl." Agatha felt that she had taken leave of reason as well as of principle. "Hephzibah Diggs," she repeated thoughtfully. "I suppose it would have rather a quaint sound to any one not used to it."

"It's a name for the vaudeville stage," said Mr. Forbes with conviction. He returned to the subject of Agatha's other substitute. "I suppose Warren will have a chance to get more of an impression of Miss Finch than I have succeeded in doing, for he'll have his eyes to help him out. All I have been able to discover is that she never finishes her sentences."

"She's shy with men, poor girl," said Agatha, and then as he looked puzzled, "Of course she seems quite elderly to you, but to me she's only a girl."

Forbes whistled softly, shaking his head. "A blind man would credit you with immortal youth, and convict her of never having been less than middle-aged. I begin to believe that eyesight is misleading."

Agatha broke away from him before her mood

of reprehensible recklessness should have implicated her still further. Then in the seclusion of her own room, she wept. "It's bad enough to stretch the truth when I positively can't help it," she told herself, "but this morning I simply wallowed in falsehood. And now I must live up to Hephzibah Diggs. Why couldn't I have called her Mamie Thompson? It's all the fault of that atrocious Warren person, and I wish something would happen to him on the way down. I suppose it's too much to hope for a railway accident, with only one passenger killed, but that would serve him exactly right."

Agatha's courage did not revive until she undertook to prepare Miss Finch for the responsibilities which would devolve upon her in the absence of the mistress of the house. Her pale eyes became unnaturally prominent as Agatha explained.

"Agatha, I can't. I'd go through fire and water for you, but I can't have a lie on my conscience. At my age I've got to prepare for death, any day, and I can't be loading my soul down with mortal sin."

"Oh, Fritz, don't be so foolish. It's not necessary to lie." Agatha's conscience gave a twinge like an uneasy tooth, as she recalled her entirely

gratuitous inventions of the morning. "All you have to do is to keep from telling the truth."

"You can do it all right, you're so quick-witted, but I have to have time."

Agatha had an inspiration. "If he says anything you don't know how to answer, pretend you're hard of hearing. And make him keep repeating it over till he gets tired, or you've thought of something to say."

Miss Finch showed no inclination to rejoice over this simple solution of her difficulty. Her thin nose reddened as abruptly as if it had been pinched, and her eyes filled.

"I know I'm going to make a mess of things. I've felt from the start that no good could come of cheating a blind man. And after you go to-morrow—"

"But I'm not really going, Fritz. Somebody must do the cooking. I shall be in the kitchen, and my name will be Hephzibah Diggs."

"Hephzibah Diggs!" Miss Finch repeated, appalled. "You're going to be somebody else?"

"Only till Mr. Warren gets out of the house."

"And you picked out that name yourself, just for the fun of it?"

Agatha reddened under her old friend's accusing gaze. "I had to have some name," she protested weakly.

"You didn't have to have that. It almost looks to me as if you were getting where you took pleasure in deception."

As this only echoed Agatha's self-accusation, she exclaimed, "The idea!" with an air of indignant protest.

"It keeps me awake nights," Miss Finch continued mournfully, "the way things are in this house. It seems as if there might be an explosion any minute. You're young and light-hearted, Agatha, and you can't understand my feelings."

"Can't I, though," mused Agatha, as her old friend tottered toward the house. "And what's more, I shouldn't wonder if the explosion came off in just about twenty-four hours."

CHAPTER V

COMPANY MANNERS

AGATHA took leave of Forbes about two hours before Warren's train was due. She had worked valiantly most of the morning to render the room he was to occupy approximately presentable. She had patched the worst places in the carpet, provided two chairs with seats of cretonne, and brought all the pictures from her own quarters to help disguise the defaced condition of the guest-room walls. Her feeling of dissatisfaction with the result, rather than her labors, had tired her, and she had no heart for making the most of the dramatic possibilities of the farewell. In her faded print dress, with a dusting cap drooping limply over one ear, she presented herself on the porch, hastily drawing on a kid glove, her sole make-up for her rôle.

"Well, good-by, Mr. Forbes. I'm going now."

Forbes took her gloved hand in both his. "I

hope you'll have a delightful week-end," he said cordially. "Nobody deserves it more."

"I'm not anxious to get my deserts," Agatha assured him with truth, and then to head off inconvenient questionings, "Give my apologies to Mr. Warren, and say that if it had been possible I would have been here to receive him myself. But I am sure that Miss Finch and Hephzibah between them will make you perfectly comfortable."

She released her hand and pulling off her glove as she went, betook herself to the kitchen, where Phemie was still washing the dishes from the midday meal. Left to herself, Phemie could be trusted to stretch that uninspiring task over the better part of the afternoon. Thanks to Agatha's presence, the splashing at once became animated.

Deprived of the stimulating companionship of his elderly hostess, Forbes decided to accompany Howard to the station. From the kitchen window Agatha watched the carryall pass and recalled the sensations with which she had first seen Forbes approaching in the same shabby vehicle. Perhaps her present apprehensions would prove as groundless as those. Agatha whistled a martial tune, as she beat up her cake, and sought diversion in addressing

Phemie with that disregard of grammatical precedent to be expected from a girl named Hephzibah Diggs,

The usual number of loungers was in evidence at the Bridgewater station, and the approach of Howard and his passenger was the signal for animated comment. The rumors Agatha had been at such pains to disseminate had taken on new and startling details as the village gossips rolled them under their tongues. It was stated on indisputable authority that Forbes had been the victim of sunstroke during his South American sojourn, and that this had left him blind and with his mind permanently affected. Another equally authoritative version pictured him the slave of an appetite for liquor and accounted for his presence at Oak Knoll by the fact that the village was "bone dry." All the rumors agreed, however, in emphasizing Forbes' aversion to society, and though Howard was surrounded and questioned as soon as he stepped on the platform, it was not till the train was in sight that any one ventured to approach the vehicle where Forbes sat alone.

Howard, absorbed in the responsibilities connected

with the recognition of Mr. Warren, failed to notice the intrusion on Forbes' privacy, but a number of other people were more observant. For once the arrival of the four o'clock express had a rival in the public interest. The unconscious Forbes was the target for a dozen pair of curious eyes, as Jim Doolittle slouched toward him.

Jim paused by the carryall and looked Forbes over with the agreeable certainty that he could make his scrutiny as prolonged and insolent as he pleased, without being called to account. Then as the noise of the approaching train warned him to make the most of his conversational opportunities, he ventured a remark: "How do you find yourself today?"

Forbes' face showed no change of expression. Though Jim's nasal tones reached him distinctly, it did not occur to him that he was the object of solicitude. Jim waited vainly for a reply, and then, spurred to persistence by his grinning audience, he tried again, this time lifting his voice to a bellow, as if Forbes were deaf as well as blind. "Air they treatin' you right out to Kent's?"

Forbes turned with a start. "Beg pardon! I didn't know you were speaking to me."

"You're stayin' out to Kent's ain't you, for the summer? Folks say you came for your health."

"Yes." Forbes spoke stiffly, sharing the impression of most men who have always been robust, that illness is a disgrace. "The doctors advised a change of air."

"And does Aggie Kent take good care of you?"

The formality of Mr. Forbes' manner became more pronounced. "Miss Kent," he replied, with marked emphasis on the prefix, "has made me most comfortable."

"Glad to hear it, glad to hear it," Mr. Doolittle assured him affably. "Seems as if takin' boarders was pretty risky for anybody of her age."

Forbes' irritation deepened. "Miss Kent is perfectly capable and extremely vigorous. I believe she could tire me out."

"Yes, I shouldn't wonder," Jim agreed, rather to Forbes' annoyance. "And I guess Zaida Finch steadies her down when there's a chance of her doin' something flighty."

As this suggested to Forbes the weakening of his hostess' intellect through age, necessitating the guardianship of Miss Finch, he contented himself by a disdainful silence. The approach of Howard

with a stranger in tow checked further conversational angling on Jim's part. He tore himself away with a genial, "See you later," to which Forbes responded by a non-committal grunt. But he forgot his annoyance as Warren shouted his name, coupled with those abusive epithets with which his sex are wont to disguise sentiment toward one another.

Mr. Ridgeley Warren took an unaffected pleasure in his own society, which as a rule proved contagious. He was an inveterate talker, noisy, slangy, in every way Forbes' antithesis. Warren admired Forbes' dignity, and Forbes found diversion in Warren's flow of spirits. And beneath this mutual admiration was one of those steadfast affections which springing up between two men is more lasting, in nine cases out of ten, than the love between men and women.

It was fortunate that the staid bays knew the way home, for though Howard sat with the lines in his hands, he left to the horses all responsibility for keeping to the road, and turning at the right crossing. Warren told stories steadily all the way, and roared his appreciation of each. Howard laughed too, and Forbes shared their amusement, though less

boisterously. Though the horses moved with deliberation, the five-mile drive seemed short.

As they turned up the driveway at Oak Knoll, Forbes said with the pride of a proprietor, "Fine old place, isn't it?"

"You bet," agreed Warren, his eyes upon one of the splendid oaks which had given the place its name. Then beyond, he caught sight of the house, and he leaned forward for a better look. "House been standing for some time, from appearances."

"Built by Miss Kent's grandfather," Forbes replied boastfully, "and she's well on to seventy. I imagine the house is a hundred years old."

Warren, staring at the sagging roof of the old building, looked as if he could easily believe it, but unaware of his lack of enthusiasm, Forbes continued: "I'm sorry you're not going to see Miss Kent, as she's away for over Sunday. You'd fall in love with her on sight."

Warren shrugged his shoulders. "Seventeen is nearer my style than seventy. Can't you trot out some pretty girls for me to fall in love with?"

"I'm afraid Miss Finch is all we can offer you in the way of feminine society, old man, and I've found

her 'uncertain, coy and hard to please.' But you always had a way with the ladies. You might do better."

The carriage stopped at the door. Howard alighted and possessed himself of the visitor's suitcase. Miss Finch, who from the window of the living-room had watched their leisurely progress along the driveway, appeared on the porch, prepared to do her duty as hostess if it killed her. Miss Finch's nose was red and her lips were blue. Despite the warmth of the mild summer day, her teeth chattered.

Warren's hilarious air had disappeared with his first view of the dilapidated country house where his friend was spending the summer. His introduction to Miss Finch completed his undoing. He stared at the tremulous little figure in silent stupefaction. What on earth was Forbes doing in this tumbledown building with two old women for company? And the extraordinary part was that Forbes seemed contented with his quarters. Warren ascended the stairs to his room, trying to make up his mind how to handle the situation. He had an uneasy feeling that his friend was being imposed on.

The appearance of his quarters confirmed his

worst apprehensions. Warren looked around him, shook his head, and rejoined Forbes on the porch, feeling the necessity of immediate action. But Forbes' air of tranquillity made him hesitate. After all, if Forbes himself were satisfied, that was the main thing.

He broached the topic cautiously. "I judge your friend, Miss Kent, isn't what you'd call opulent."

"Hardly, or I shouldn't be here. She advertised for boarders. Some one was reading me a few of the promising ads from the *Onlooker,* and I recognized her name. You see I visited her once when I was a boy, and I've always remembered the beauty of the place."

"Trees are fine," agreed Warren with reserve. "But the buildings all seem rather seedy. Need paint badly."

"Do they?" Forbes spoke indifferently. "Paint is the least of my troubles."

"I suppose so. But say, Forbes, are you sure it's a good thing for you to be cooped up here all summer with two old hens?"

He had fancied he was being tactful, but to his surprise Forbes seemed irritated.

"You haven't seen Miss Kent. If you had, you'd

know that she's a regular beef, iron and wine combination."

"If she's like Miss Finch," Warren was beginning, when Forbes interrupted him with such spontaneous laughter that he dropped his sentence unfinished.

"She's about as much like Miss Finch as a collie pup is like those Teddy bears the kids lug around. She's an old lady in years, but otherwise she's as young as you or I. She's so full of vitality that you can't be near her ten minutes without feeling braced up. She's like a mountain breeze."

"Pity a woman of that sort didn't marry," commented Warren dryly.

"That's what my old dad thought. Miss Kent was his first love, and he stayed single on her account till he was well on to forty."

"Maybe that's why you're ace high with the old lady. She's trying to make up to the son for turning down the father."

"Can't say, I'm sure. I imagine it's her disposition to be kind to the crippled and disabled and generally good-for-nothing."

His tone was suddenly bitter, and Warren's look sharpened. "How's Julia?" he asked with seeming irrelevance.

"Julia's well and enjoying herself." Forbes' manner seemed to defy his friend to criticize, and Warren, who would have enjoyed nothing better than expressing his opinion of Julia, changed the subject abruptly. If Forbes liked this gone-to-seed place and the society of old women it was no concern of his. Queer how differently men were affected when their love-affairs went wrong. Some took to drink and some were women-haters. With Forbes it had developed a craving for the atmosphere of an Old Ladies' Home. Every man to his taste.

Supper partly dissipated Warren's concern. The dining-room was as rusty as the rest of the house. Miss Finch at the head of the table looked tinier and more frightened than ever. The girl who waited on the table was, without exception, Warren decided, the most unattractive specimen of youthful femininity he had ever come across. But the supper was unique. As Warren ate, his high spirits returned. Old Forbes knew what he was about, after all. A homely waitress need not trouble a blind man. Warren was almost inclined to believe that he himself could put up with the sight of Phemie's vacant face for the rest of his life, if he could be sure of three such meals every day.

In the relief from his anxiety regarding Forbes, Warren turned his attention to Miss Finch. She looked so helpless over all his jokes, that he realized the necessity of strict literalness in dealing with her. "I suppose you've known Miss Kent for a long time," he said by way of beginning.

Miss Finch paled over the shock of being addressed, but answered with unusual promptness, "Yes, ever since she was a teething baby."

In an instant she knew what she had done even before Forbes, turning a perplexed face in her direction, asked, "But you're the younger of the two, are you not?"

Miss Finch opened her mouth like a newly-landed fish, and closed it again without speaking. The device Agatha had suggested and which she had mentally dismissed as "acting a lie," thrust itself upon her recollection, and she clutched it with the avidity of the desperate. Putting her hand to her ear with the immemorial gesture of the deaf, she quavered, "What did you say?"

"I asked if you weren't the younger of the two. Miss Kent said to me the other day that she thought of you as a mere girl."

"I didn't quite catch what you said," faltered Miss

Finch, but before Forbes could again repeat his inquiry, Phemie created a diversion. She had taken the water pitcher to refill it, and as she advanced to the kitchen door, her tray extended before her, she looked back. It was characteristic of Phemie to walk in one direction and look in another. Agatha was beginning to congratulate herself on having at last eradicated this tendency, but she had not reckoned on the effect of a handsome and lively young man on Phemie's susceptible temperament. As she turned for another look at Warren, Phemie's tray came into collision with the door and the pitcher, overturning, broke in fragments.

As was inevitable, every one turned to look. Warren, who was in range of the door, saw it open, apparently of its own accord. A figure stood in the passageway, fairly dazzling in its effect after the gray tints of Miss Finch, the subdued tan and tow of Phemie. His eyes drank in the colorful apparition for some ten seconds and then a rounded arm closed the door. Phemie picked up the fragments of the broken pitcher, and tearfully withdrew.

Miss Finch sat through the remainder of the meal without tasting a morsel, waiting in an agony of apprehension for Forbes to ask her again whether she

was older or younger than Miss Kent. She might have spared her anxiety, for Warren's flow of conversation gave no chance for settling such minor perplexities. Warren was one of the men to whom the propinquity of a pretty woman is as stimulating as champagne. He did not think it probable that the apparition in the kitchen could hear his witticisms, but he assumed that she must realize who was responsible for the hilarity at the supper table. And even without this confidence, he would probably have talked and jested in the same breezy fashion, this form of responsiveness to beauty being instinctive with him rather than deliberate.

The moment he was alone with Forbes, Warren broached the subject engrossing his thoughts. "Burton, you have my sympathy. You don't know what you're missing. Under this roof there's as pretty a bit of flesh and blood as ever wore petticoats. Take it from me, she's a peach."

"Phemie?" exclaimed Forbes. "The waitress?"

Warren's derisive yell effectually settled Phemie's claims. "Gosh, no! That girl would stop a clock. This one was out in the kitchen, but I could see her peeking through after the smash-up."

"Oh, yes," exclaimed Forbes, recollecting. "I know. That's Hephzibah."

Warren positively staggered. "Lord, forbid," he ejaculated piously, "she can't be."

"She is, though, Hephzibah Diggs."

Again Warren's stentorian tones shattered the peace of the night. He used his first spare breath in announcing his intention to get a nearer view and see if a girl named Hephzibah Diggs could possibly be the beauty she had seemed. The announcement of this intention rendered Forbes uneasy.

"You let Hephzibah alone," he warned his friend. "These self-respecting country girls think themselves as good as anybody—they *are* as good as anybody. And I'm responsible to Miss Kent for your behavior."

"I don't want anything of the girl except to see her by daylight. She's not too self-respecting for that, is she?" And then seeing that Forbes was really annoyed, Warren dropped the subject of Hephzibah, though without the least alteration in his intentions.

It did not prove so easy as he had anticipated to get a satisfactory view of the girl whose face,

glimpsed in the half-light of the previous evening, had seemed so alluring. At breakfast time Phemie met with no accident, and though Warren watched the swinging door that led to the kitchen with the alertness of a cat at a rat hole, it swung open and shut without revealing anything more seductive than a corner of the kitchen table. The day was warm, but the outside kitchen door remained obstinately closed, and on the rare occasions when it opened, it was Phemie who emerged.

Warren was not a man who readily surrendered. Indeed, difficulties were likely to stiffen a careless desire into adamantine resolution. When his watch showed noon and Hephzibah Diggs continued invisible, he decided it was time to take matters into his own hands. He rose from his chair on the porch stretching his sinewy length lazily. "I believe I'll walk about a bit," he said, "and work up an appetite for dinner. With meals like these, a man wants to be able to do himself full justice every time he sits down to the table."

"You ought to try Miss Kent's cooking," boasted Forbes. "She trained this girl, and she does well, but she's not a patch on her teacher."

Warren's stroll took him no farther than the

kitchen door. He ascended the steps jauntily and knocked. After waiting vainly for an invitation to enter, he decided to assume that it had been spoken, and pushing the door ajar, he walked in.

Over in the corner Phemie was chopping something in a wooden bowl, but in spite of the insistent tapping of the knife upon the wood, he was hardly conscious of her existence. A girl stood at the table rolling out biscuit, and her sleeve turned back almost to the shoulders, revealed a faultless arm, white and rounded and tapering to the finger-tips. She turned her head at his step and he thrilled with amazed pleasure. His glimpse of the previous evening had not been misleading. Indeed his impression had fallen short of the actuality. He was looking at the handsomest young woman he had ever seen.

Mr. Ridgeley Warren did not lack self-confidence. His momentary silence was due to wondering admiration, not to any doubt of his power to please. With smiling self-possession he advanced into the room. In her corner Phemie chopped on steadily, without removing her fascinated eyes from his face. Hephzibah—it was preposterous that this radiant creature should be encumbered with such a name—continued to roll biscuit.

"You seem busy here," remarked Warren in his most ingratiating manner. "Don't you want an assistant?"

He was sorry to discover that the voice of Hephzibah Diggs was not in accord with her bodily perfection. She talked through her nose and that fact impressed him so painfully he almost lost the force of her reply, "Guess me and Phemie kin manage."

"I'm quite a little cook myself," continued Warren, saddened but not discouraged. "In my last place they said my parboiled cauliflower beat anything they had ever tasted. And my string-bean *parfait* has become popular in the best New York restaurants."

Phemie's delighted gasp was his sole applause. Hephzibah Diggs gave her attention to her biscuits.

Warren seated himself on one corner of the immaculate table and began to talk with his customary volubility. His remarks took the form he imagined would please a country farmer's daughter, lacking the rudiments of education. He soon realized, and with some irritation, that he was making an impression on the wrong girl. Phemie chortled joyfully over her chopping. Hephzibah Diggs listened as if it were against her principles to smile.

She brought three eggs from the pantry presently and broke them in a workmanlike manner, whites in one bowl, and yolks in another. "Got to have three more," she said to Phemie in that unpleasant nasal voice which helped to reconcile Warren to her continued silence.

A little flicker of triumph crossed Warren's face. Her sending Phemie for eggs was obviously a ruse to be alone with him. When Phemie had departed on her errand, with obvious reluctance, he leaned toward Hephzibah, his smile so confident that it was almost a smirk. She looked up with a directness rather disconcerting and he reflected that her eyes even in a face like Phemie's, would have given her a certain claim to beauty.

"I don't like men folks hangin' 'round when I'm busy." Her speech, it appeared, was as direct as the gaze of those adorable, reddish brown eyes.

"Then what do you say to a little walk when you've finished your work?"

"I ain't got the time."

"You mean you've got another fellow up your sleeve, don't you? Say, let's give him the slip. You ought to be nice to me after I've come so far to see you."

She turned her attention again to the cooking, drawing her arched brows into a frown. He noticed with approval that her beauty lost nothing of its distinction by her look of ill temper. But perhaps that was because the ill temper was a make-believe.

He leaned toward her persuasively, losing his head a little in her proximity. His pulses quickened. He thought he had never seen anything prettier than the way her hair crinkled away from her creamy neck. It occurred to him that he would like to kiss the cheek whose vivid freshness seemed an invitation to such temerity. Country people were primitive and direct. With a girl of the type of Hephzibah Diggs, a kiss was simply a natural expression of admiration.

As his lips brushed that blooming cheek, she reached for the bowl containing the egg yolks. She did not look in his direction as she flung the contents in his face, but her aim was true. He sprang to his feet with a gasp and a sputter. There was an incredible quantity of that sticky yellow stuff, matting his hair, dripping from his eyebrows, trickling in sickening streams down his neck.

"You little vixen. Does this stuff spot?"

Hephzibah ignored his inquiry. Warren backed away, laughing nervously, his mood divided between anger with her and shame for himself. Then panic seized him at the thought of encountering Phemie and he took a hasty departure, mopping himself with his handkerchief as he ran.

Howard had driven Miss Finch to church and Forbes was alone on the porch. "You didn't walk far," he said, recognizing his friend's step.

"No—o. Had an encounter with a wasp. I'll be down in a minute when I repair damages."

He hoped Hephzibah would not tell Miss Kent of the episode, but he decided to take the chance, and suggested to Forbes his coming up again in two or three weeks. To his surprise Forbes was not enthusiastic.

"It was awfully good of Miss Kent to take me in," he explained, apparently forgetful of the advertisement which was responsible for his presence at Oak Knoll. "And I don't want to bother her with too much company. I think she finds it upsetting to have strangers around, and it's not singular when you come to think of it. For all she's so wonderful, she's really getting to be an old lady."

CHAPTER VI

HEPHZIBAH COMES TO LIFE

MISS KENT'S company at breakfast Monday morning was an agreeable surprise to Forbes, his pleasure chastened only by his regret that Warren had left on the late train the previous evening. "I particularly wanted you to meet him," Forbes complained. "If I'd known you were to be back so early I should have insisted on his staying over."

"It's only the young who can make a good impression at breakfast," Agatha responded. "Old people need twilight and candles." She raised her eyebrows in the direction of Howard, who was indicating his approval of her answer by a soundless show of spirited applause.

"I'd risk the impression you'd make any hour in the twenty-four," rejoined Forbes gallantly. "But it is too late now. Serves Warren right for being in such a rush to get back to his confounded business. Tell us all about your good time, Miss Kent."

"I didn't have one." Agatha felt the statement to be indiscreet, but her imagination was not equal to lending any glamour to her nightmare of a Sunday.

"You didn't enjoy yourself?" Forbes' voice indicated sympathetic surprise. "Why, what was wrong?"

"I didn't say I was going away to enjoy myself. I didn't expect to. You took that for granted."

"I see. One of those formal visits that are even more deadly than formal calls, because they're longer."

"And it turned out worse than I expected." Agatha was finding a certain melancholy pleasure in speaking her real sentiments. "Because I had a disagreeable encounter with a perfectly obnoxious person. But it's over, thank heaven, and I don't want to talk about it."

This topic being tabooed by mutual consent, it was natural that Forbes should begin to talk about Julia, as a theme eminently calculated to cheer the despondent, and lend interest to the most tedious hour. Agatha, listening, realized that her week was to be a hard one. It was time for Forbes to expect another letter from Julia, and of course Julia would not write so promptly as he expected, and it would

be increasingly difficult to keep him in good spirits. Over her coffee Agatha laid plans for distracting her boarder's thoughts from his elusive correspondent.

Her apprehension proved correct. That afternoon Howard was sent to the village to do one or two little errands for his employer, and incidentally to get the mail. The next day the same program was followed and the third brought no change. And meanwhile the arrival of the Rural Free Delivery wagon was daily awaited with an anticipation not justified by results.

Agatha starting down the long driveway one morning, as the fateful hour approached, saw Forbes and Howard on ahead, evidently bound on the same errand. Before she could turn back, Howard caught sight of her and abandoning his charge, he came toward her on the run.

"You were starting for the mail, weren't you, Aggie? Would you mind taking him along while I see if I've got a rat in my trap?" Then dropping his voice to a scornful undertone, "He's got to go himself because he's expecting a letter from his girl, and can't wait for it to be brought up. See?"

Agatha accepted the commission without com-

ment. She joined Forbes, and taking his arm, guided him the length of the shaded drive. Neither had much to say. Forbes was evidently bracing himself for possible disappointment and Agatha was not in a talkative mood. They had hardly reached the main road before Agatha's observant eyes detected in the distance a significant cloud of dust. "He's coming," she said with a reservation in her tone intended to warn her companion not to be oversanguine. "We won't have long to wait."

The wagon approached and halted. The driver produced a miscellaneous assortment of letters and one good-sized package, the latter he scrutinized as if reluctant to part with it. "Do you know anybody around here," he brought out with irritating deliberation, "by the name of Diggs—Hep—Hephzibah Diggs? Ain't that a name for your life?"

Agatha gazed at him wild-eyed, incapable for the moment of speech.

"It's addressed to Oak Knoll," the speaker continued. "But I thought mebbe there was some mistake. I never knew any Diggses in these parts."

Agatha recovered herself and extended her hand. "Yes," she said hurriedly. "It's all right. I'll take it."

The mail-carrier surrendered the collection. "You're getting to have quite a raft of boarders," he commented affably. "Feller has to have his wits about him to keep track of so many new names." He clucked to his horses and the wagon rattled on.

Oblivious to her responsibilities as temporary post-mistress, Agatha stood quaking. To her guilty conscience the significance of the mail-carrier's inquiry was unmistakable. He had never heard of a family in the vicinity named Diggs. He assumed that Hephzibah was a summer boarder. Agatha did not doubt that Forbes was pondering these extraordinary facts, and that his first words would demand an explanation. With hanging head she waited for him to begin his cross-examination, but his voice when he spoke was anxious rather than peremptory. "Well?"

Agatha gasped. "I—why—you see—"

"You know her handwriting, don't you?" asked the lover. "I'm not sure where this letter will be posted."

Agatha reflected that love is sometimes deaf as well as blind. So engrossed was Forbes in his own anticipations that the compromising conversation with the mail-carrier had made no impression on his

consciousness. After a hasty survey of the handful of letters, Agatha announced in a stifled voice that there were two letters for Forbes, but neither seemed to be from Julia. Her face betrayed an emotion due not to the tragedy of Forbes' disappointment, but to the discovery that there was a letter as well as a package, addressed to Hephzibah Diggs. That young woman, the fantasy of a day, had taken on a terrifying vitality. There was no way of estimating her possible activities. Agatha's emotions were those of Frankenstein when he discovered that his monster was alive.

They made their way back to the house, Forbes valiantly explaining why it was foolish to have expected a letter before afternoon, and Agatha making irrelevant replies. She turned her companion over to Howard and escaped to her room with the mail addressed to Hephzibah Diggs. An absurd scruple regarding the opening of other people's letters temporarily paralyzed her efficient right arm, and she stood staring at the address of the communication without coming any nearer a knowledge of its contents. It was impossible to rid herself of the feeling that she was on the point of attempting something dishonorable.

"What a fool I am," she groaned in exasperation. "Hephzibah Diggs isn't anybody, but if she were anybody, she'd be me." She tore open the letter without giving herself a chance to evade the inevitable conclusion of this bit of logic.

It was from Warren, of course. She had been prepared for that, even without the testimony of his bold signature. With a curiosity that momentarily made her oblivious to the menacing aspects of the situation, Agatha read the brief communication:

"My Dear Miss Diggs:

"I am writing you a line to apologize for my conduct Sunday. You were all right, and I was all wrong. At the same time, you'll have to take a little share of the blame for being so distractingly pretty that a man's likely to lose his head when he comes near you.

"I am sending you by this mail a package which I hope you will accept as indicating my regret for having offended you, and my sincere wish to be

"Your friend,

"Ridgeley Warren."

Agatha turned her thoughtful attention to the package which bore Hephzibah's name. She proceeded to strip off the wrapping paper with a haste indicating that her scruples were finally set at rest.

Then as she took the cover from the five-pound box of chocolates, and gazed enraptured at the triumph of the confectioner's art, she temporarily laid aside the feeling of age due to the faithful impersonation of her great-aunt, and became nineteen or a trifle less.

"Chocolates," murmured Agatha. "And millions of them. In the person of Hephzibah Diggs I accept the apology."

When she reappeared upon the porch, her manner was cheerful, and a number of yawning cavities marred the symmetrical arrangement of the topmost layer of chocolates in the box up-stairs. Forbes greeted her with more animation than she had looked for, considering his recent crushing disappointment.

"That's you, isn't it, Miss Kent?"

"Yes."

"Here's a letter Howard has just read me. I want you to look it over and tell me what you think of it."

"Very well." Agatha seated herself comfortably and took the letter from his extended hand. But Forbes was evidently desirous of preparing her for its contents.

"It will be a surprise to you, I imagine, Miss

Kent. What is your opinion of Hephzibah? Is she really such a stunning beauty?"

"I suppose she would be considered fairly good-looking if any one liked the type." Agatha flattered herself that she had spoken with a creditable lack of prejudice.

"According to Warren she's considerably more than that. The fact is, he—but you'd better read the letter. That makes it plain enough."

With a return of her previous misgivings, Agatha followed his suggestion.

"My Dear Forbes:

"If you had shown a little more enthusiasm over my suggestion of dropping in on you again soon, I should have run down at the end of the week, and had a good talk with you. Owing to your inhospitable reluctance I'm obliged to trust to writing, which I sometimes think was invented, as somebody said about speech, for the purpose of concealing thought.

"To come straight to the point, I must confess that I had a short and not wholly satisfactory interview with the fair Hephzibah on Sunday, in the course of which my earlier impression of her beauty was more than confirmed. By jove, Burton, she positively is a dream. And the idea that a creature of that sort should spend her days amid pots and kettles is obnoxious to any right-thinking man. We've got to do something about it, Forbes. What

do you think of sending her to school somewhere, and having her educated? It would be virgin soil, I imagine, for the poor girl can't open her mouth without taking a bite out of the king's English, and her voice is like a guinea hen's. But that could be trained out of her. For all her ignorance, she's nobody's fool. You can see that by looking at her.

"Now I'm putting the thing up to you because I suppose it would be better to have Miss Kent act for us in the matter. Judging from my brief experience Hephzibah—can't we find some euphonic substitute for that name?—is as self-respecting as the devil. Explain to Miss Kent that I'm a respectable man of philanthropic tendencies—hitherto unrecognized—and ask her what would be the best way to go about taking the girl in hand, and giving her an education, or enough of one so she can make a reasonably good appearance. And then we can decide on the next step. A few hundred a year will be enough to do the job properly, and if you feel like going into it with me, it might help to reassure Miss Kent as to the impeccability of my motives.

"Lord! What a letter! I haven't written so much with my own fist since I was in college, and at the same time I feel as if fifteen minutes of chinning would have made the matter a heap clearer. If the girl should prove to have enough head for the legitimate stage she ought to make a hit as Katharine, in *Taming the Shrew*. She's exactly the type, red hair and all.

"Regards to the voluble Miss Finch, to Howard, and of course to Miss Kent. Yours,

"R. W."

Agatha was glad the letter was a long one, as this gave her time to think. And yet the result of her thinking was but a confused jumble of varying apprehensions. Her recollection of Warren's face as he leaned toward her, was that of a man not easily turned aside from a purpose. But somehow or other he must be forced to surrender his absurd philanthropic intentions in behalf of Hephzibah Diggs.

Forbes was waiting for her verdict. "Well?" he said at last, when she showed no inclination to speak. "What do you think of it?"

Agatha cleared her throat. "It's out of the question," she shot at him so violently that he looked startled.

"I'm ready to vouch for Warren," he hastened to say. "I don't mean that he would be as ready to help a plain girl as a pretty one, but I assure you that your protégée would be perfectly safe as far as he's concerned. And I suppose he's right in thinking that beauty is one of the talents, and it's hardly fair to keep it wrapped in a napkin."

"But she doesn't want to be educated," Agatha protested. "She's perfectly satisfied just as she is."

Again Forbes seemed to find her vehemence perplexing. "Perhaps her ignorance explains her in-

difference," he suggested. "Do you think she's capable of learning?"

"I suppose she's capable enough."

"If she's really a strikingly handsome young woman with a fair mind, and Warren is sufficiently interested in her to give her an education, doesn't it seem that she should be encouraged to accept his offer? Surely if she is what he thinks, she is capable of something better than the work she is doing at present. Unless you have some good reason for feeling that it would not do—"

"But I have," flashed Agatha. "I have."

"Oh, indeed!" He seemed to be waiting for her to explain, and she floundered on with a horrible sensation of being caught in a quicksand.

"She doesn't wish to be educated. She doesn't wish any notice taken of her; she only asks to be let alone."

"To be let alone." He said the words over as if they had a hidden, mysterious meaning. "Oh, I think I begin to see."

Agatha sighed her satisfaction. She had no idea what explanation had presented itself to the perspicacious Mr. Forbes, but she perceived that at length her protests had taken effect and he was pre-

pared to relinquish the argument. So great was her relief that the processes of his mind failed to interest her.

Unluckily Forbes was one of the people who insist on certainty. "I suppose," he said, a note of sympathy in his deep voice, "that the poor girl has been unfortunate."

Agatha blanched. He waited for her avowal, then tried again: "You mean, I suppose, there's some unhappy episode in her past life and she doesn't want to attract attention for fear of its bobbing up again."

Agatha stared at him aghast. Her first impulse to defend the character of Hephzibah Diggs at any cost yielded to a less worthy caution. If she gave Hephzibah a clean bill of health, figuratively speaking, what other reason could she invent for her invincible repugnance to attracting attention? With fascinated horror she realized that Forbes' conjecture exactly filled the requirements of the case. There was no help for it. The fair name of the blameless Hephzibah must be sacrificed to that most merciless of the divinities, the exigency of the moment.

"You have expressed it," faltered Agatha with an

unnerving sense of rank injustice, "as well as I could have myself."

"Poor girl!" Forbes repeated, "and so young, too. At least I suppose she's young, from Warren's idea of educating her."

Again he waited for an answer, and Agatha stammered, "Ni-nineteen."

"And all this happened some time ago, I suppose."

"Oh, a long time." Agatha was crimson to her ears.

"It seems a shame," mused Forbes aloud. "Her whole life to be sacrificed for one step aside from the straight and narrow path. You and I know the world, Miss Kent. And we know—"

"Oh, please," protested Agatha faintly, "I don't know anything about it."

He leaned toward her quickly, touched by the appeal in her voice.

"Excuse me, Miss Kent. I know you belong to a generation whose women were trained to shut their eyes to a great many things. I don't believe in that theory of life, but I haven't any intention of violating your prejudices. All I wanted to say was that you and I have lived long enough to know that thousands of our respected citizens, prominent socially

and otherwise, are every bit as guilty as that poor girl. And since this is the case, isn't it a pity that her morbid sensitiveness should shut her out of making something of herself?"

It was unbelievable. Hephzibah's reputation had been blackened in vain. Even now he was unwilling to leave her in the seclusion her sensitiveness craved. He was determined to drag her into a garish publicity. Iphigenia had been sacrificed and still the winds were unfavorable.

"Oh, I wish you would not talk of this any more," cried Agatha, the intensity of her feeling showing in her moved voice. "I understand Hephzibah's case a great deal better than you do, better than you ever can. And I know that the thing you're talking about is out of the question."

His face reflected her agitation in the shape of profound sympathy. "You're sure that if we talked it over, we wouldn't find a way out? Two heads are better than one, you know?"

"I'm absolutely certain."

"Then I won't distress you any further. Of course Warren has barely seen the girl, and it's evident that his head was a little turned by her beauty. You know her, and I'm sure you appreciate the re-

sponsibility of deciding a question that concerns her so closely, without even consulting her."

"I can speak for her as I would for myself."

"Then I'm sorry if the suggestion has worried you. I'll see you're not bothered again." He spoke confidently, and Agatha hoped he did not overestimate his influence where Ridgeley Warren was concerned. When she remembered the square chin of the last-named young man, she did not feel sure.

In her heart she gave Forbes credit for having done his best. Later in the day Howard showed her a letter he had written to Mr. Ridgeley Warren at Forbes' dictation. Without explanation but in the most emphatic manner possible, Warren was assured that his scheme was impracticable. "I can not very well go into details," the letter ran, "but Miss Kent, who knows the case thoroughly, has convinced me that the kindest thing, as far as the girl is concerned, is to leave her alone." And to this sentiment Agatha sighed a tremulous amen.

CHAPTER VII

DAY DREAMS

FOR the first time since she could remember, Miss Finch felt herself living in an atmosphere of romance. If a young man's fancy turns to thoughts of love only under the allurements of spring weather, Zaida Finch surpassed the average youth by full three seasons. Love and matrimony occupied her thoughts twelve months in the year, and to an extent inconceivable in view of her general colorless and withered aspect.

Though as far as possible removed from the designing spinster of the comic stage, Miss Finch had not as yet surrendered the hope of changing her name. From her point of view the unmarried woman was a self-advertised failure. Husbands, as far as she had been able to observe, were always disappointing, and not infrequently obnoxious, yet to lack one somehow proved one's self less than a

woman. In those dreams which never passed the bounds of maidenly reserve, she sometimes imagined herself addressed by the prefix which indicates the dignity of wifehood—she would have died sooner than have coupled it with the name of any man of her acquaintance—and then in the words of a simpler and more direct age, she felt that her reproach among men had been taken away. The secret weighing heaviest on her heart was the knowledge that no man had ever indicated that he wanted her.

Needless to say, Miss Finch's present mood of sentiment was entirely vicarious. Agatha's prospects absorbed her almost to the exclusion of her own timid dreams. Miss Finch was constitutionally incapable of realizing Agatha's vivid beauty, though she sometimes told herself that if it were not for her red hair, which she innocently assumed to be a misfortune, Agatha would be a really pretty girl. Forbes had no sooner made his appearance than Miss Finch had inventoried his qualifications for Agatha's future husband, and had not found him altogether wanting. His blindness was a misfortune largely offset by his amiability, and free use of money, and in her association with him, Agatha had developed

a sympathetic patience her old friend could not regard as characteristic.

"And it looks to me as if he were taken with her," Miss Finch had congratulated herself. "He chirks up as soon as she comes near him. If he likes her so well when he thinks she's an old woman, he ought to like her better when he finds she's a young one."

There was, to be sure, one serious difficulty to be met in the readjustment of Forbes' ideas on the important subject of Agatha's identity. At this point Miss Finch's dreams ended in chaotic confusion and with her oft-repeated lament, "There's no good going to come from cheating a blind man."

After Warren's visit, Miss Finch's match-making tendencies took another direction. If Warren had failed to make an impression on the unsusceptible Hephzibah, he had nothing to complain of as far as Phemie and Miss Finch were concerned. In spite of the agitation induced by her unwonted responsibilities on the occasion of Warren's visit, Miss Finch had been keenly alive to the young man's cheerful good humor, and his naive self-enjoyment had communicated itself to the one of his audience who

seemed least responsive. "Exactly the one for dear Agatha," declared Miss Finch.

With the discovery of the source of the box of chocolates, Miss Finch's smoldering hopes leaped into flame. Caution had dictated Agatha's concealment of Warren's tangible apology, but to a girl of her temperament the solitary consumption of a five-pound box of confectionery was a moral impossibility. Her innate generosity forced her to share the sweets with Forbes and Miss Finch and Howard and even with Phemie. Three of her beneficiaries accepted their shares as unthinkingly as the lilies of the field, but Miss Finch showed a troublesome tendency to ask questions.

"Agatha, you don't mean you've been wasting your money on candy? A box of that size must have cost something awful."

"No, Fritz, I didn't buy it."

Experience had taught Miss Finch to be on her guard when Agatha wore that look of wide-eyed innocence. She pondered the seemingly straightforward reply.

"Having things charged is the same as buying 'em, Agatha. You've got to pay for 'em some time."

"But these were given me, Fritz dear. They were an apology."

"Mr. Forbes!" gasped Miss Finch, and at once the strains of the wedding march rang in her ears.

"Mr. Forbes! The very idea! The only trouble with him is that he never did anything in his life to apologize *for*. He's so perfect that people mistake him for a worm and trample on him."

"I didn't mean to make you mad, Agatha," Miss Finch protested timidly, shrinking from the flame in Agatha's eyes. The inexplicable girl stared for a moment and then to Miss Finch's great relief, burst into a laugh.

"Fritz, you're funnier than a box of monkeys. If you must know, Mr. Warren sent the chocolates."

"To you?" Miss Finch almost screamed it. And forthwith the summer breeze brought to her nostrils the odor of orange blossoms.

"That's the question that's troubling me, Fritz. The box was addressed to Hephzibah. But as I am her nearest living relative—you might almost say her mother—"

Miss Finch swept these fine points aside. "I didn't know he'd ever seen you."

"He walked into the kitchen while you were at

church. That's exactly his style, I imagine. And when he saw me there rolling biscuits, he talked a lot of nonsense and ended by kissing me."

"Agatha!" gasped Miss Finch. Her emotions were confused. She was under the impression that this recital confirmed her wildest hopes and at the same time outraged her finer sensibilities. Possibly her reprehensibly exultant feeling was due to an overwhelming certainty that this at least was life.

Her face aflame as if she and not Agatha had been the recipient of that kiss, Miss Finch attempted to discharge her responsibilities as mentor of youth. "Agatha, I can't understand it. I'm afraid you must have acted bold. I never heard of a gentleman's walking into a kitchen, and kissing a young lady he'd never seen before."

"Nor I, Fritz. And that leads me to the conclusion that Mr. Warren isn't exactly a gentleman. At the same time," Agatha added, helping herself to another chocolate, "he apologized very sweetly."

"Is he coming to see you?" demanded Miss Finch, who in her ignorance of the ways of the great world assumed that so spontaneous a tribute must be merely preliminary to an ardent courtship.

"He had an idea of taking my education in hand."

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Agatha briefly outlined Warren's philanthropic scheme in behalf of Hephzibah Diggs, and Miss Finch turned all colors as she listened. Now at last she knew that the romantic novels with which she solaced her leisure hours had not misled her. There really *was* such a thing as love at first sight.

"Agatha!" she ventured tremulously, "you could marry that man to-morrow if you liked. It's as plain as the nose on your face that he's dead in love with you."

"If it were as plain as the nose on *his* face, that would settle it. But as nothing would induce me to marry him to-morrow or any other day, the state of his feelings doesn't matter."

"But I'm sure, Agatha," remonstrated Miss Finch, "that you wouldn't want to break his heart."

Agatha's reply was a paroxysm of laughter that left her gasping and tearful. "Oh, Fritz," she half sobbed, as she wiped her eyes, "I'm so glad you didn't die when you were little."

Miss Finch was on her dignity. "I know you're making fun of me, Agatha. But it's no laughing matter to wreck a man's life."

Again Agatha yielded to mirth. "You've seen Mr. Warren and yet you say that."

"I can't see why you take that tone, Agatha. I'm sure he's a nice young man and so lively."

"I'll admit the liveliness but not the heart, at least not the broken heart. That young man owns a good, tough, thoroughly seasoned organ, take it from me."

Miss Finch sighed but with less dejection than her manner indicated. Little as she had learned of the ways of men and women in her guileless spinsterhood, she had somehow gathered the impression that girls occasionally abused the admirers who stood highest in their maidenly affections, for the pleasure of hearing them defended. And though she could not be sure that this explained Agatha's slighting references to a most agreeable young man, Miss Finch resolved to lose no opportunity of sounding Warren's praises. In his case, too, there was an unfortunate confusion of identity to be cleared up, but from Miss Finch's point of view, a young man who could give a kiss and a mammoth box of chocolates to a pretty girl, under the impression that she was a servant, would not hesitate to lay his heart at her feet when he discovered that her blood was as good as his own.

Developments convinced Miss Finch of the wisdom of her chosen tactics. She overlooked no op-

portunity to speak a good word for the absent Warren, acquiring a certain irrelevant eloquence on the theme. And though Agatha gave no indication of agreeing with her, it was evident that she enjoyed her earnestness and was more inclined to lead her on than to check her fluency.

Whether because of Miss Finch's judicious opposition or some less obvious reason, Agatha was in noticeably high spirits. She entered into playing her rôle with a whimsical abandon that at times moved even Miss Finch to laughter, in spite of her conscientious misgivings. Indeed the spirit of cheerful animation pervaded the entire household. Whether because Forbes had at length resigned himself to hearing from Julia only once in two or three weeks, or whether the improvement in his health furnished the necessary elasticity for resisting disappointment, his moods of depression were becoming very infrequent. He spent less time on the porch and more on long jaunts with Howard. The two went fishing frequently and sometimes Agatha made a third, in which case the pace was regulated strictly according to Forbes' view of what was due her advanced years. Agatha was sure she would find more enjoyment on the occasions when the two

males went as fast and as far as they pleased, undeterred by consideration for the aged.

One exhilarating morning Forbes and Howard left soon after breakfast, taking their luncheon with them, and advising Agatha to expect them only when she saw them. With her customary knack for utilizing the moments, Agatha improved their absence to despatch a number of tasks awaiting her attention, and wound up by washing her hair. She made her appearance on the lawn in the early afternoon, her splendid mane falling almost to her waist and reflecting the sunshine like burnished copper. Already the little tendrils were beginning to curl about her face while the water dropped from the long ends.

Agatha seated herself in the sun, lifting the coppery mass strand by strand, that it might dry more quickly. Had Miss Finch been versed in classical lore, she might have been reminded of the golden fleece for which men risked so much. As it was she said chidingly, "Agatha, you will freckle terribly if you're not careful."

"This sun is worth a peppering of freckles," Agatha answered recklessly, but she pulled her hair over her face and then she resembled Danäe veiled

by a shower of gold. It was several minutes
she made a peek-hole in the screen, and loo
Miss Finch apprehensively.

"Fritz, I hear wheels. Don't tell me that i
of my repeated warnings, we're going to hav
ers."

Miss Finch stood up. The very slight adv
due to an upright position was sufficient to
her to recognize the occupant of the approa
vehicle. "It looks to me like Jim Doolittle."

"Jim Doolittle!" exclaimed Agatha, an
"Why, what can he want? He must be comi
see you, Fritz."

"Agatha!" quavered Miss Finch, and flus
painful purple.

"Well, he certainly isn't coming to see me,
find it hard to believe that Phemie is the m
He doesn't know Mr. Forbes and Howard is a
young to attract him. Please see what he
Fritz."

"I—I'd rather not, Agatha."

"Why, Fritz, what ails you? You can se
yourself that I'm in no condition to intervie
Doolittle. His modesty would never surviv
shock. Send him away as soon as you ca

won't do to have all the busybodies of the neighborhood dropping in whenever they feel like it."

Reluctantly Miss Finch departed on her inhospitable mission. But it seemed that Agatha had done Mr. Doolittle an injustice. He had come on an entirely altruistic errand.

"There was a telegram at the office for Aggie's boarder, and I offered to bring it out, being as I was driving by."

"A telegram for Mr. Forbes!" fluttered Miss Finch, forgetting her shyness in sympathetic concern. "I hope there's no more trouble in store for that poor young man."

"Wal, the Bible says to him that hath shall be given, and I've noticed that's likely to come true, as far as trouble's concerned. How's the poor feller getting on? I had a little talk with him one day, and I made up my mind he warn't the June-bug sort of crazy, just the glum, hold-your-tongue kind."

"I guess Mr. Forbes' brains would hold their own alongside yours or mine!" Miss Finch spoke with some heat and realized her mistake in time to add, "Though of course he thinks a lot of things that aren't so." It soothed her conscience to realize the absolute truth of her closing statement.

"I know, hallucinations they call 'em," said Mr. Doolittle, proud of his mastery of the polysyllable.

Miss Finch was not sure whether Agatha could be reckoned a hallucination or not and she evaded the issue by adding pointedly, "He's got quite an aversion to company."

"I could see that. You'd have thought it would be a real relief to him to talk with me, man to man, after being shut up with a passel of women-folks, but no! I couldn't scarcely get a word out of him." Mr. Doolittle shook his head in sad wonder over the vagaries of a mind distraught, and then his attention wandered to a patch of color on the lawn. "Is that Aggie Kent in the brown dress with her hair hanging?"

"Yes."

"Looks like a haycock struck by lightning." Again Mr. Doolittle shook his head. "Aggie's a lucky girl to have you on hand to steady her and keep her acting sensible. I guess everybody 'round here knows who's the backbone in this house."

"Agatha's an awful capable girl," said Miss Finch. She was aware that she did not deserve the compliment, yet because of that contrary twist in human nature from which the most exemplary are not al-

together free, it gave her pleasure. "Agatha don't need any backbone but her own," she insisted.

Mr. Doolittle straightened his sagging figure and tightened his lines. "Wal, if the young man should get vi'lent any time just call on me." He clucked to his horse and the ramshackle buggy creaked away.

The great moments of life come and go while we remain oblivious. As Mr. Doolittle jogged down the shaded drive, he said to himself that Zaida Finch would make some man a good wife. He even turned his head to look back, and the prim little figure hurrying across the grass seemed to his elderly eyes to radiate a certain maidenly charm.

All unconscious of this momentous occurrence, Miss Finch carried the telegram to Agatha, and that young woman shared her apprehension, though for a somewhat different reason.

"It's not so likely to mean trouble for him as for me. Perhaps some more of his city friends are coming to visit him. If they do, I think I'll have an attack of smallpox and quarantine the place." She stood up extending her hand for the message. "I must hunt him up right away and find out."

"You're not going that way, are you, Agatha, with your hair all down? You look like a crazy girl."

"What's the difference? Mr. Forbes won't be scandalized, because he can't see me. And the birds and the squirrels won't mind. It's not dry enough to put up yet."

Telegram in hand, she started up the slope behind the house. Miss Finch's faded, troubled eyes saw her silhouetted in glowing relief against the intense blue of the summer sky, and then lost her as she passed out of sight over the brow of the hill.

CHAPTER VIII

THE RESCUE

FORBES and Howard had spent the morning in the open. They had tramped miles under the genial sun, had eaten a luncheon which disproved the accepted theory as to the capacity of the human stomach, and at the conclusion of the meal had rested in the shade, Forbes smoking, and Howard sprawled upon the turf, idly watching the woolly clouds that like a flock of sheep grazed across a pasture of luminous blue.

Suddenly Howard leaped to his feet, and the next moment the report of his shotgun shattered the lazy hush of the summer day. To Forbes' secret annoyance, his nerves betrayed him into a violent start. He had not been aware that firearms were included among his young companion's impedimenta. "Hello!" he exclaimed disapprovingly. "What are you shooting at this time of year, boy? You'll get yourself into trouble if you're not careful."

"It's a chicken hawk. They're awful thick around here. Much as ever Ag—Miss Kent raised any chickens this spring."

"Oh!" Forbes subsided, with a smile. "Every season's open for chicken hawks, I suppose."

"Well, there's one robber out of the way," Howard boasted. "He went down like a stone. Say, Mr. Forbes, would you mind staying alone a few minutes while I run down the hill and see if I can find him?"

"Go ahead, my boy." Forbes smiled again, as Howard's headlong rush told how promptly he had acted on the permission. Forbes' mood was hopeful, and therefore indulgent. There was something tranquillizing in the atmosphere of the summer day. It was easy to believe in his ultimate and complete recovery, and even that Julia would wait for him instead of engaging herself to one of the men who were helping to make her summer enjoyable. Young Prendergast was the rival he had most reason to fear, and that was a sore spot with him, for Murray Prendergast had his father's money to recommend him, and little besides. Forbes was ready to defend Julia for breaking their engagement, but though tortures could not have elicited the avowal,

in his heart he was humiliated by the possibility that Julia might turn from him, to throw herself into Murray Prendergast's arms. Eyes or no eyes, Forbes knew himself the better man.

Yet to-day in the sunny peace of this Arcadia, the thought of Prendergast had lost its power to sting him. He could reflect on Julia's love of admiration with a tolerant smile. Flirtation was the feminine equivalent of masculine wild oats, and he would be a fool to put an exaggerated importance on a beautiful girl's innocent coquetries. Miss Kent was hard on Julia. That was the way with the best of women. They did not know how to be fair to one another.

"Bless her dear heart!" Forbes was not thinking of Julia now. His smile had become tender. "What a champion she is! She never can see but one side, and that's yours—if you happen to be the fellow she likes."

His fancies, tenuous as the smoke of his cigar, wove themselves into pictures as he sat dreaming. He saw himself restored to health, and in a home of his own. He saw Julia beautiful as ever, but with matronly dignity replacing her girlish charm. And there were little shapes whisking in and out of that dreamland, creatures half sprite, half human, and

his cigar went out as he watched their capers. An observer would have noted a hint of pathos in his smile as well as a whimsical humor.

He roused himself from his long reverie to wonder what had become of Howard. Making all due allowance for the ardor of the chase, Howard's absence had been protracted beyond all reason. Forbes whistled long and shrilly, shouted Howard's name, and waited with growing uneasiness. He could only make a rough estimate of the time that had elapsed since the boy's departure, but he knew it must be nearer an hour than the few minutes Howard had asked for. And it was not like Howard to forget him.

He had no way of measuring the time as it dragged on, but he ceased at length to assure himself that he was becoming a fidgety old woman, and frankly admitted he had reason for alarm. It was impossible to explain Howard's continued absence on the ground of boyish thoughtlessness. There was another and possibly a sinister explanation. His heart sickened as he realized that Howard might be seriously injured and with no aid near. As the thought suggested itself, he sprang to his feet in furious rebellion against his helplessness.

"I've got to get to the road somehow. Then I can hail the first wagon that passes, and send some one over here to look for that boy." He realized that the thing was simpler in the statement than in the doing. The last road they had crossed was at least half a mile from where he stood, and to grope his way unguided over half a mile of open country was a desperate undertaking. He was not even sure of the points of the compass.

Forbes was angry to find himself trembling. He took a stronger grip upon his self-control, and racked his brain for any information that would be of service. Howard had spoken of a south wind that morning and Forbes was under the impression that when they returned home from their jaunts up into the hills, they walked toward the setting sun. He wet his finger and held it up to test the direction of the breeze. He was likely to go wrong, he knew, but anything was better than inactivity.

Stumblingly and with his hands outstretched, he started on his way. His progress was slow. At first he was continually halted by imaginary obstacles from which he shrank till his groping hands convinced him that the way was clear. Resolving on bolder tactics, he marched along at a swinging

pace till a collision with a stalwart pine sent him reeling back, gasping and half stunned. Again he tried caution and after an interminable half-hour abandoned it, as intolerably slow. He picked up a rotting branch over which he had stumbled, and waving this before him to make sure that no tree barred his way, he found himself making very creditable speed for a blind man without a guide.

After a little, again he halted, thinking he heard a faint, wailing cry. He strained his ears, his heart thumping. "Howard!" he shouted. "Howard!" He wondered if his nerves were playing him a trick, or whether he really did hear a second time, that faint sound of distress. He started on at a reckless pace, brandishing his stick before him, and occasionally shouting Howard's name.

So utterly had the thought of his own safety passed from his mind that a second collision was only to be expected. But this time it was not a tree, whose impact sent him staggering backward, but a human form. Involuntarily he dropped his stick, catching at the nearest object to save himself, and was aware that two hands had seized him in a clutch as desperate as his own. For a moment they clung together in an embrace like the locked clasp

of two drowning swimmers. Then a voice deep down in Forbes' consciousness said, "Good God, it's a woman."

As his head steadied he knew he was not mistaken. There was a smothering quantity of hair for one thing and it seemed to be everywhere at once. When he moved just a little to get away from it, he put his cheek against another cheek of exquisite smoothness. Surprise rendered him incapable of moving, and standing like a statue, he made other interesting discoveries. The woman in his arms was breathing in long-drawn gasps like sobs. He could feel the convulsive straining of her chest against his, as her breath came and went. Under his hand her heart plunged like some frantic creature in a trap. Then he realized that she was trying to speak.

"You fool," she could only whisper it, with that strange sobbing breath. "You fool! Oh, you fool!"

"My dear girl!" Forbes remonstrated. He could not have told why he was so sure of the fitness of this form of address, except that the curves of the pliant body, that lay limp against his heart, were somehow eloquent of youth. "I don't understand you."

His protest had an immediate and in some respects an unwelcome effect. At once her relaxed form stiffened and withdrew from his arms. A strand of hair rasped across his cheek producing a curious tingling like a mild electric shock. But she had not gone far, for he could distinctly hear her difficult breathing.

"You were walking to your death. In another minute you would have been over the cliff."

"Is it possible!" No normal man can escape death by a hair's breadth and remain unmoved. Forbes' face paled. For a moment he was intensely conscious of the myriad fragrances steeped in the sunny air, of the myriad sounds, significant of teeming life. But he had no time to waste on himself.

"I knew I ran a risk but it was necessary. As you see I am blind, and my attendant, a young fellow named Sheldon, left me for a few minutes while he hunted for a hawk he had shot. That must have been two hours ago. I'm afraid the boy is hurt."

She murmured something he failed to understand and he did not ask her to repeat it. "As soon as you are able to walk, please go somewhere and get help. He may be seriously injured."

"I said he was coming—I see—him coming." She

still whispered but her breathing was obviously less painful.

"Howard coming? Do you mean Howard?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure you know him?"

"Yes."

"Does he seem to be hurt?"

"Not that I can see—he's running."

"Thank God!" Forbes exclaimed. He had time now to think of himself and his deliverer. He took a step nearer her, and it seemed to him, though he could not be sure, that she drew back a little.

"As I understand it, you saw me from a distance, and realized I was in danger. And you ran to help me."

"Yes." The monosyllable was hardly more than a breath.

"I thought I heard a cry once. Did you call?"

"I tried—to. Running up hill—I didn't—have breath."

There was a hysterical catch in her voice. Forbes seized her by the arm. "Oh, you're crying. Please don't."

"I'm not." She sobbed aloud as she denied the charge and continued to sob to his immense distress.

He found her hand and patted it soothingly as if she had been a child.

"Poor girl! I can see how unnerving all this has been. But won't it help a little if you remember that you've saved my life?"

"Oh, don't! Don't!"

"I'm afraid you'll have to let me say it, but I'll wait till another time if you'd rather. Please tell me your name."

"It d—doesn't matter."

"It matters a great deal to me. It isn't every day, you know, that a man has his life saved by a beautiful girl." He felt singularly secure regarding his adjective. "And of course I want to know who you are."

She wrenched her hand away with disconcerting energy. "It—doesn't matter about me," she said as well as she could for weeping. "But don't take such risks again. Good-by."

"Now this is positively absurd," exclaimed Forbes in real annoyance. "You've done me a tremendous service, the biggest one human being can do another, and I'm not the sort of man to remain ignorant of my benefactress. I want a chance to show that I'm not unappreciative."

Silence!

"Are you there?" Forbes demanded sharply. So vivid and illuminating were his recollections of the woman his arms had enfolded that it seemed preposterous he should never know how to address her.

Continued silence.

Forbes bit his lip and waited. And behind his back, a singular pantomime was being enacted. A young woman whose heavy red hair fell about her like a cloak, ran into the arms of a breathless boy approaching from the opposite direction. She put her lips to his ear and whispered, "Don't tell him who I am."

"All right, but what's the matter, Aggie? What are you crying for?"

"Never mind. Nothing. Don't tell him my name."

"But what if he asks me?"

"Don't tell him, that's all." She drew herself away from him and started by a circuitous route for home. Howard approached his waiting employer with a new perplexity superimposed on his former perturbation.

"Mr. Forbes, I don't know what you'll think of me—but down there I ran into the game warden."

"Oh, did you!" Forbes' attitude was a trifle absent-minded. "Then you weren't hurt."

"No, sir, I'm all right. But he'd got hold of a partridge some one had shot and he was bound I'd done it. And he made me go along with him and I thought I would never get away."

Howard's voice showed strain. Forbes' groping hand found his shoulder and patted it.

"All right, old man. No harm's done. I own I was anxious when you didn't show up, but no harm's done."

"Are you ready to go home now, Mr. Forbes? It's nearly four o'clock."

"Yes, we'd better go." Forbes took the boy's arm. "By the way, Howard, did you see a girl talking with me a few minutes ago?"

"Ye—es, I saw her." Howard's manner betrayed reluctance.

"What is her name?"

An incomprehensible silence followed. Forbes repeated the question with more than his customary peremptoriness.

"I—I don't think I can tell you, Mr. Forbes."

"Do you mean you don't know?"

Howard was a truthful boy. "Yes, I know it," he replied hesitatingly. "But she"—a sudden inspiration came to his aid—"Miss Kent don't want me to talk about her."

"I shall ask Miss Kent myself," Forbes rejoined coldly.

"Yes, sir," said Howard, brightening. "That would be better." He felt that it really was up to Aggie to get out of the difficulty as best she could. It was all very well to say to a fellow that he was not to tell a certain thing, but she didn't take into account that he would feel like a fool when he was asked a plain question.

As it proved, however, Forbes did not appeal to Miss Kent for enlightenment. As they neared the house Howard proved the youthful resilience of his spirits by making a little joke. "It's a good thing you're not married, Mr. Forbes."

Forbes did not agree with him, but he forced himself to smile amiably, and ask the reason for the conjecture.

"Because there's a long red hair on your coat collar."

Forbes saw the point and much besides. Under-

standing came in a flood. The girl was Hephzibah, of course, poor unfortunate Hephzibah, ashamed even to give her name and yet more sinned against than sinning, he was strangely sure. Without seeing it, he had felt the spell of her beauty, that beauty that had enthralled Warren. As he thought of his friend, Forbes was instantly convinced that he had too readily yielded to Miss Kent's insistence, regarding Warren's offer. He even felt a certain tempered irritation with his old friend for having taken on herself the responsibility of deciding for another so vital a matter. Now that the girl had saved his life it was unthinkable that he should leave her to her fate just because of an old-fashioned theory that there was no future for a woman who had once gone wrong.

He felt so strongly on the subject that he might have spoken his mind to Miss Kent on reaching home had he been given the opportunity. But Zaida Finch met him with the information that Miss Kent had gone to bed with a severe headache, and that a telegram had come for him about the middle of the afternoon. She hoped it was not bad news.

The telegram proved to be from Forbes' physician, who was going away for his vacation, and

wished to look his patient over before leaving. It gave him his choice of coming to the city on Wednesday or Thursday, and Forbes chose Wednesday. He had decided to waste no time before having a talk with Warren.



CHAPTER IX

AN EMBARRASSMENT OF RICHES

NO HUMAN being expects to die and all expect to marry. Observation continually proves the groundlessness of one or both of these anticipations, without altering the attitude of the survivors. In the background of the consciousness of the most confirmed bachelor or spinster, stands the shadowy form of the possible wife or the possible husband.

Mr. James Doolittle, at fifty-five, had no idea of escaping the matrimonial yoke. He thought of himself always as an eligible young fellow, waiting for the right girl to come along. On two or three occasions earlier in life he had temporarily congratulated himself on finding the right girl, but as the ladies in question had disagreed with him, there had been no escape from the conclusion that he was mistaken. These disappointments he had accepted with an edifying equanimity, reminding himself that



there were still as good fish in the sea as had ever graced a frying pan.

Just why, on a certain summer afternoon, Jim's vague and groping expectations should suddenly have focused upon Zaida Finch, and why her familiar, faded features and diminutive, gnome-like body should have taken on the quality of allurement, is one of the mysteries which will remain a mystery when the riddle of perpetual motion has been solved. As the memory of Miss Finch hurrying across the grass continually recurred to him, Jim said to himself that though a trifle more flesh would not hurt her, she was a cute little thing. And forthwith he was conscious of a feeling of youthful irresponsibility, flatly contradicting the testimony of the family Bible.

Yet it was with no very definite purpose in his mind that on the Wednesday following his brief call at Oak Knoll, Mr. Doolittle resolved on a second visit. Even incipient love is fertile in excuses. He argued that the most elementary sense of courtesy demanded his ascertaining the nature of the telegram of which he had been the bearer, and extending his sympathy in case it had brought bad news. With the lack of candor with himself, fre-

quently manifested by wiser men in his condition, Mr. Doolittle failed to explain the fact that he assumed for the call the necktie which for thirty years he had worn on dress occasions, hand-painted daisies on a pink background. The silk was faded now and the daisies had lost much of their original perky luster, but with the hand-painted necktie tied under his chin, Mr. Doolittle felt himself a figure to appeal to the exacting feminine taste.

His state of mind pleasantly indeterminate, Mr. Doolittle jogged through the dust in the direction of Oak Knoll. As yet his ardor had not reached the point where the leisurely pace of the gray nag got on his nerves. The droning peace of the midsummer world was reflected in the serenity of his spirit. But as he neared Oak Knoll, the sound of wheels halted him at the foot of the long driveway, and waiting there, some intuition ruffled the placidity of his mood, and left him alert and uneasy.

Jim knew his suspicion justified when suddenly upon his startled and hostile vision emerged another buggy, smarter than his own, and newly washed. The driver, Deacon Wiggins, looked up from the contemplation of his sorrel mare to bark a gruff greeting, "Afternoon, Jim."

Deacon Wiggins was eminently a marrying man. He had married early, and as often as a complacent Providence, assisted by pneumonia, heart disease and typhoid, had permitted. A rather rusty band of crêpe around his hat, preserved with commendable thrift from one bereavement to another, bore witness to his latest loss some three months earlier. And with a lover's quick suspicion, Mr. Doolittle leaped to the conclusion that the deacon's errand to Oak Knoll was the same as his own, that in his eyes, too, Zaida Finch had found favor. His voice rasping as he realized the insatiable greed of some of his sex, Jim Doolittle returned the deacon's greeting with a sneering, "Wasn't looking to see you here."

Deacon Wiggins at once drew rein. His errand had not been a sentimental one. He had called to collect from Miss Finch the amount of her very modest subscription to the cause of foreign missions, and had been met by Phemie with the news that the blind boarder and Howard had gone to the city on the early train, and that the ladies of the family were celebrating by spending the day with friends. Whereupon the deacon had replied that he would call again, and had gone his way unruffled, till halted by Doolittle's challenge. Though Deacon

Wiggins was well past fifty and had been thrice married, he had not outgrown that instinct which impels two young cockerels to assault each other with murderous intent.

"You wasn't looking to see me, eh?" repeated Deacon Wiggins, ponderously sarcastic. "Well, I don't know as that matters, Jim, as long as I didn't come for the sake of seeing you."

Doolittle reddened violently. "No, it's plain enough what you've come for."

The note of unreasonable jealousy was unmistakable. And while the deacon was quite in the dark as to the other's meaning, all his masculine dignity was in arms over the realization that another man was attempting interference with his doing as he pleased. "Whether I came for one thing or another," he retorted, "I don't have to ask your leave."

"Must make Zaida Finch feel terrible proud to know you are thinking of her for Number Four."

The introduction of Miss Finch's name into the conversation took the deacon by surprise, but he made no attempt to allay the groundless suspicion. Instead he replied, "A good many women would rather be Number Four with some men than Number One with others I could mention." The mag-

nanimity which kept him from giving names was clearly a pretense, for his significant smile pointed his meaning unmistakably.

"There's no accounting for tastes," acknowledged Mr. Doolittle, transformed by his fury to an unbecoming turkey red. "But sometimes folks have better taste than we give 'em credit for."

The deacon's smile was as belligerent as a blow.

"You're right there, Jim. You're right. I've always said that the sort of men who die old bachelors show the women ain't such fools as some folks take 'em to be."

He clucked to his horse and drove on. Doolittle, breathing hard and unable to think of a sufficiently crushing rejoinder to this final insult, waited till the deacon was out of sight before turning up the drive. To him Phemie repeated her story of the blind boarder's departure for the city, escorted by Howard, and the consequent gadding of the ladies of the family.

Mr. Doolittle drew a long breath as he realized that the fell designs of Deacon Wiggins had been temporarily foiled. He was not the man, however, to underestimate the gravity of the situation. His rival was notable for prompt action, as his previous

marriages had abundantly proved. Left to himself, Doolittle might have meandered through several years of more or less ardent courtship, before reaching the point of asking Miss Finch to change her name, if indeed, he ever reached it. But the certainty that Deacon Wiggins would waste no time in such preliminaries forced him to realize that he, too, must act with promptness, or resign himself to loss. Jim's vague intention became definite in view of the purposes with which he credited the deacon. With mingled sorrow and indignation he wondered at the man's grasping nature.

Meanwhile Deacon Wiggins, jogging homeward, was undergoing a very similar psychological experience. The most pronounced trait in the deacon's character was his obstinacy. He was an ardent Democrat, for the reason, it was generally believed, that he lived in a community of devout Republicans. He had been drawn irresistibly to the Congregationalist body because, as his acquaintances were certain, he sprang from Methodist stock. In all his dealings Deacon Wiggins could be safely counted on to take the off-side. But it had been long, indeed, since anything had so whetted his native stubbornness as his brief interview with James Doolittle.

In a general sense it might be said that Deacon Wiggins was looking for a wife. He was always looking for a wife in those interruptions to his marital bliss, whose brevity shocked the finer sensibilities of Mr. Doolittle. But at present his attitude was one of critical observance rather than active search. Mentally he had inventoried the attractions of several unattached females of the community, though the thought of Zaida Finch, as designed by Providence to solace his loneliness, had never crossed his mind. But now that Doolittle's indiscreet opposition had turned his thoughts in her direction, Deacon Wiggins said to himself that he might go further and fare worse. Miss Finch was a fine woman, a little undersized and scrawny for his taste, but a woman of good temper and good principles, eminently qualified to make a satisfactory wife. Seemingly the newly-awakened ardor of Jim Doolittle was like a searchlight, illuminating virtues hitherto unnoticed. The deacon reached for his whip and surprised the sorrel mare by a cut across the flank. Mentally he had crossed his Rubicon.

Miss Finch, placidly ignorant of the designs of Destiny, had passed a pleasant day. She had found it an immense relief to have Mr. Forbes away, even

for twenty-four hours, for she never lost the sense of walking amid pitfalls while he was in the house. Agatha, in the rebound from the necessity of acting the rôle of an elderly maiden lady, had been more whimsically childish than usual, and had imparted to her faded little friend something of her own irresponsibility. Accordingly Miss Finch passed a pleasant day, and a peaceful night, and woke in the morning quite unprepared for what fate had in store.

In Forbes' absence, the arrival of the Free Delivery was only an ordinary incident in the day's routine. Miss Finch went down the drive to get the mail a half-hour or so after the wagon had passed. And when in another half-hour it occurred to Agatha to inquire as to the results of that expedition, it took her a good five minutes to locate Miss Finch. At length her search brought her to a weather-beaten bench under the trees, where Miss Finch had seated herself as if to rest from the fatigue of the walk up the drive. At her feet were scattered various items of mail, which had slid off her lap in the stress of her emotions and lay on the grass unnoticed.

"Well, Fritz, you must have found some absorbing reading," Agatha began. "I've screamed myself

hoarse calling you." She paused, regarding her old friend with sudden concern. Miss Finch's face was singularly flushed and her pupils dilated like those of a sleep-walker. In either hand she clutched a letter.

"Fritz, what it is?" Agatha exclaimed in real alarm. "Aren't you feeling well?"

Much to her relief, Miss Finch's head turned in her direction. Up to this time she had seemed oblivious to her presence.

"Yes, I feel all right, Agatha," she replied, her voice dreamy and unnatural. "I—I'm going to be married."

The violence of Agatha's start indicated an almost uncomplimentary incredulity.

"You are—what did you say, Fritz?"

"I'm—I'm going to be married."

"For heaven's sake! Who is it?"

Miss Finch's manner lost something of its assurance.

"I haven't quite—made up my mind."

Agatha's expression of astonishment changed quickly to consternation. She came close to the little lady, slipping a hand through her arm.

"Fritz, dear, hadn't you better come to the house

and lie down? The sun is awfully hot, and you shouldn't have gone out without a hat." She studied Miss Finch's unnatural color with a sinking heart. Was it a touch of the sun or something worse?

Miss Finch, though perfectly aware of the nature of Agatha's apprehensions, showed no resentment. Indeed the difficulty she had experienced in combating her own incredulity enabled her to sympathize with her young friend's perplexity.

"When I say I haven't made up my mind, I mean I haven't decided which one to marry."

"Yes, I see, Fritz. Now let's go to the house. Just lean on me." Phemie would have to go for the doctor, Agatha decided. She herself would not dare to leave.

"If you don't believe me," exclaimed Miss Finch, a sense of injury at last making itself manifest in her voice, "you can read the letters for yourself."

Agatha snatched the extended missive, thankful for anything that would throw light on Miss Finch's singular hallucination. Her stubborn incredulity received its first shock when she saw Miss Finch's name written across the yellow envelope in an unmistakably masculine hand. The contents of the letter completed her undoing.

"MISS ZAIDA FINCH:

"DEAR FRIEND—I have always believed the truth of those words of Scripture that it is not good for man to be alone. (Gen. 2:18.) Three dear companions have I taken to myself only to yield them to the cold and silent tomb. Have you ever thought of changing your state? You are so much in my thoughts that it seems a leading to show that it is you who should fill the place of my three lost companions, till you, too, shall be called from battle to reward.

"I hope you will make this matter a subject of prayer, and will see your way clear to accept me as your husband. Write me how you feel about it. I enclose stamp. Yours truly,

"HIRAM L. WIGGINS."

Agatha read the unusual document breathlessly, too relieved by the discovery that Miss Finch's mind was not seriously affected to appreciate to the full the unique literary quality of the composition. Deacon Wiggins actually was proffering Miss Finch his hand and so much of his heart as had not been consigned to the tomb along with the three deceased ladies who had borne his name. Agatha's impressions of the deacon were vaguely hostile, yet she realized that from Miss Finch's standpoint, the occasion called for congratulations. Agatha was not unaware of the little spinster's attitude of wistful

anticipation where matrimony was concerned. And though it was difficult to think of Deacon Wiggins as the realization of a romantic dream, she warned herself that she must not be a kill-joy.

"I'm sure, Fritz," Agatha said, with no trace of her usual mischief, "that the deacon will be very fortunate if you decide—" She checked herself, for Miss Finch was extending a second letter.

"For the love of Mike," Agatha gasped, borrowing from Howard's vocabulary as her own seemed inadequate. "You don't mean there's another?"

"Yes, there are two, Agatha," said Miss Finch, and under the circumstances her flitting expression of complacency was quite excusable.

The dreadful suspicion flashing through Agatha's mind, that the guileless Miss Finch had been made the butt of a peculiarly obnoxious practical joke, vanished as she read Jim Doolittle's letter. It was too characteristic for her to doubt its authorship.

"DEAR ZAIDA:

"Please excuse me calling you Zaida, for as Zaida you are enshrined in my thoughts, and I think of you very often when I am sad and lonely and I wish I had a wife like you to cheer me, and to be a help-meet to me like the Bible says, and while I have not married again and again like some people I could

name it has not been because I do not have a high opinion of women. And if I should be left alone I should not go looking for some one to take your place right away, for with me to love once is to love always, and, dear Zaida, my heart beats for you alone. Yours truly,

"JAMES DOOLITTLE."

Agatha was seized with a paroxysm of coughing, the businesslike conclusion of the letter seeming decidedly inconsistent with its impassioned prelude. Then, recovering herself, she went over to Miss Finch and kissed her.

"Well, Fritz, you're a lot too good for either one, but women are, as a rule. Which is it to be?"

Miss Finch looked down at her first love-letters with an anxious expression, hardly befitting the occasion.

"Well, Agatha, I'm not sure. There is a great deal of sentiment in Mr. Doolittle's letter. It's almost poetical in spots. I wouldn't have thought he had so much poetry in him?"

"Nor I," admitted Agatha.

"But the deacon's letter shows a beautiful religious spirit, and when you are choosing a husband you have to think of the things that are really important."

"The deacon is better off than Mr. Doolittle," suggested Agatha. "Though I've always heard he was inclined to be close."

"I wouldn't let such things weigh with me, Agatha. I can't imagine marrying a man because he had more money than somebody else. It's what a man is himself that counts with me."

"Then I suppose it's the deacon," said Agatha, with youth's characteristic readiness to jump at conclusions.

"I don't know, I'm sure. Don't hurry a body so, Agatha." Miss Finch spoke more sharply than was her wont. "If you were picking out a husband at my time of life, you wouldn't want to be rushed so that, like enough, you'd pick the wrong man."

Agatha shook her head. "No, Fritz, if I ever became such a heart-breaker that I had a batch of proposals in a single mail, I'd take as long as I could to make up my mind. I'd make the sweetness last like an all-day sucker."

Miss Finch's brief irritation vanished as she heard herself referred to as a heart-breaker. She blushed not unbecomingly.

"The names might help you in making up your mind," continued Agatha, bent on giving all the

assistance in her power. "Which is the more—what is that word—mellifluous in your ears, Mrs. Wiggins, Mrs. Deacon Wiggins, or Mrs. James Doolittle?"

"I'm afraid you're not as serious-minded as you ought to be, Agatha," chided Miss Finch. "Marriage is 'most anything you like except a joke, and you can't make a joke of it, no matter how hard you try." As she moved toward the house with her two letters, leaving Agatha to collect the widely scattered mail, her face wore a troubled, anxious look, as if the fateful solemnity of the married state already had reached out from the future and enveloped her.



CHAPTER X

A CONFESSION

BECAUSE of her absorption in Miss Finch's engrossing problem, Agatha gave the travelers of the household less of her attention on their return that afternoon than those rather spoiled individuals had reason to expect. Not till the following morning when she read Forbes a letter from Julia, even more egotistic than the average communication of that self-centered young woman, did Agatha realize that something was amiss with her boarder. He seemed tired and low-spirited, disinclined to conversation, in decided contrast to Howard, who was bubbling over with items of interest relating to their brief trip. Clearly the jaunt had been too much for the convalescent's strength.

A little conscience-stricken that she had not earlier made the discovery, Agatha set herself resolutely to the task of reviving Forbes' drooping spirits,

though with less than her usual success. And when late in the afternoon she suggested a walk, pleading that her knees were growing stiff from lack of exercise, he turned the tables on her unexpectedly by insisting that she go for a stroll with Howard as an escort, leaving him at home. And as her protest stirred him to a most uncharacteristic irritation, she yielded the point without further argument.

"Of course, if you really want to get rid of us, we'll go. Only I hate to leave you alone."

"I'm better company for myself than for others, dear lady. I'd rather be alone for a little. I'll try to sleep and perhaps I'll wake in a better humor."

Her only thought an impatient haste to have the ordeal over, Agatha started out, Howard in attendance. But her dejection yielded by degrees to the magic of the summer afternoon. It vanished completely when she challenged her brother to a race across a green stretch of pasture. They reached their goal laughing and breathless, Agatha in the lead, and climbing the low stone wall they dropped panting in the shade of a guardian elm. Agatha snuggled back against the huge trunk, tucking her feet under her, while Howard sprawled happily at her side, laying his head in her lap. Agatha's con-

tented sigh as she ran her fingers through his hair, told of relaxed nerves.

"What a pity Mr. Forbes wouldn't come! It's so restful here. What did he do yesterday to tire him so?"

"He didn't do much of anything. Saw the doctor and Mr. Warren and then—"

"Warren? Did he see him?"

"Sure. Telephoned the first thing when we got to the city and Mr. Warren came up to the hotel for lunch. They let me go out and look around for a couple of hours while they talked. Say, Aggie, I wish you knew Mr. Warren. He's a dandy."

Agatha's expressive face betrayed no especial impatience to meet the object of Howard's eulogy. Indeed a grim tightening of her lips indicated that on this theme her brother and herself were far from agreement. But before the boy had time to be impressed by her lack of responsiveness, his attention was distracted by a cough from the direction of the road, eminently a stagey cough, due not to a tickling in the throat, but to some one's desire to announce his presence. Howard turned sharply, then sprang to his feet with a shout of mingled pleasure and astonishment.

"Why, hello, Mr. Warren! Did you come out to find us? It's the funniest thing but I was talking about you this very minute."

Warren, immaculate in a gray business suit and spotless panama, gave no indication of sharing the boy's pleasure in the unexpected encounter. He looked at him with disconcerting steadiness, and Howard, turning to his sister, saw her unconcealed consternation and realized that the game was up. He had momentarily forgotten the necessity of explaining Aggie. Mr. Warren would have to know the truth and undoubtedly would take it on himself to acquaint Mr. Forbes with the surprising state of affairs. Yet after all, Mr. Warren was a good sport. Perhaps if the thing were put up to him—

Warren's peremptory speech broke in on the boy's confused thoughts. "Chase along, Howard. I don't want you at present."

"What do you want me to do, Mr. Warren?"

"I don't care what you do as long as you don't stay here."

"I—but I—" Without understanding his sense of discomfiture, Howard blushed an angry scarlet, and faced the intruder with instinctive defiance. Then Agatha spoke wearily.

"It's all right, Howard. Run along, please."

She was not easily daunted, but something in Warren's manner was accountable for a singular chill at her heart that was like fear. She had forgotten how big the man was, and his nose was so unexpectedly long and his chin so heavy, and his eyes bored into her like augers and were of a steely gray besides, which made the figure more impressive. He seemed quite another person from the silly young man who had talked nonsense in the kitchen that Sunday morning and ended by kissing her cheek.

She heard Howard stumble away, muttering angrily to himself. Very deliberately Warren moved toward her. She forced herself to lift her eyes. He was looking down at her with the air of one who has the whip-hand and knows it. For some undefined reason she felt herself at a tremendous disadvantage.

"Look here," said Warren with the same hardness in his voice she had noticed when he spoke to Howard, "this won't do, you know."

Agatha remembered that she was Hephzibah Diggs just in time to drawl the inquiry through her nose. "What won't do?"

"You mustn't be putting ideas into the kid's head. He's a nice kid. Forbes is tremendously interested in him and so is Miss Kent. On Miss Kent's account if there were no other reason, you ought to let the boy alone."

She glared at him, fury growing with understanding. Her baleful gaze fought its way to him through tears of pure rage.

Her unexpected emotion softened him perceptibly. He laid aside his air of judicial sternness as easily as he would have removed his coat.

"Come now," he said, seating himself beside her. "We mustn't quarrel. And I dare say you meant no particular harm. Only keep in mind that it's hands off where the boy is concerned."

"Have you got anything to say to me?"

"You bet I have. I've come clear from town to say it, Hephzibah. By the way, isn't there something I could call you for short?"

"Yes, Miss Diggs."

He eyed her approvingly. A tear had splashed upon her burning cheek, and was making its leisurely way toward her chin, but tears with Agatha seldom gave the impression of feminine softness. Warren had the usual masculine horror of weepy women.

It was a relief to perceive that for all her tears, Agatha's mood was murderous.

"No indeed, we mustn't quarrel," he repeated. "Because I've come on purpose to see you, and do you a good turn. I'm interested in you, and want to help you."

"I don't want none of your help."

"That's because you don't understand, little girl. This world is a pretty big place and so far you've seen only a measly little corner."

"It suits me." He saw an added enmity in her eyes, over this aspersion on her native village, and smiled tolerantly.

"I wouldn't waste any loyalty on this burg if I were in your place. I asked half a dozen people where I could find you and every one pretended he'd never heard of you."

Agatha's look showed her taken aback and Warren was not slow to follow up his advantage.

"Of course I knew they were lying. Even in this unobservant community, my dear Hephzibah, you could hardly escape notice any more than on Broadway. I assume these young men were protecting their reputations by denying the pleasure of your acquaintance."

"Oh," murmured Agatha, "I never thought I could hate anybody the way I hate you."

"You shouldn't feel that way, my child. I'm not trying to hurt your feelings. I'm perfectly ready to let bygones be bygones and give you a hand up. I only mentioned this to show the narrowness of these little country places. They never forget, Hephzibah, and believe me, they never forgive."

The fire of her wrath had dried her tears. Her eyes bright with hate, she met his gaze in silence.

"There's something about you, Hephzibah," continued Warren, a slight uneasiness of manner showing that his *sang froid* was not quite proof against her silent hostility, "something which makes me certain that it would pay to educate you. You could learn, I'm positive of it. And you'll take on polish. You say you're satisfied with things as they are. That only shows your ignorance, my dear child. Instead of being a poor little drudge, slighted and snubbed by a lot of country jays, you could make a place for yourself in the big world. I can't tell you now just what will open up for you, but at the least it would be like fairyland compared with what you have to expect here."

Her anger seemed to have moderated to tranquil

contempt. She sat aloof and disdainful, waiting for him to finish and take his departure.

"I own you don't know me well enough to feel sure of my motives in making this offer," Warren went on almost humbly. "But you can ask Miss Kent about the blind man who's boarding with her this summer, and see what sort of reputation she gives him. And he's in this thing with me. In fact it was at his suggestion that I came down here to-day."

At last he had succeeded in interesting her. Although she did not speak she turned with a quickness that had the effect of an interruption, and the recent disdainful calm of her expression was replaced by a rather wistful look.

"Yes, Forbes is in for this, tooth and nail." Warren was pleased at the altered demeanor of his audience. "When I first suggested it to him, he talked it over with Miss Kent, and the old lady discouraged him. I imagine she's a good sort but about as broad as a knitting needle. She insisted that it was better for you to be let alone, and she talked old Forbes over, and I thought the whole thing was settled. But after you saved Forbes' life—"

"Why," cried Agatha. "How—how—." Her usu-

ally ready tongue failed her, and in her blushing confusion Warren thought her adorable.

"I suppose you wonder how he knew you were his rescuer," Warren continued, enjoying to the full the pleasing effect of his revelation. "It came to him by a sort of intuition. He quizzed the kid, but Howard wouldn't tell. It simply goes to show how strait-laced the old lady is. She'd forbidden him even to talk about you. But something you said or did fitted in with what I had told Forbes about you, and he decided that he couldn't rest easy under such an obligation."

"It's only a guess." Agatha had found her voice. "You don't know anything about it."

"It was a safe bet, even before I told you and watched your face. Now it's a dead certainty. Listen! Forbes came to see me yesterday and we cocked up this scheme. See how it strikes you."

He had her attention now, close and serious, with no suggestion of disdain. Painstakingly he explained the plan. They had selected a woman both knew to act as Hephzibah's tutor. They would send her to some quiet place where there would be little to distract the girl's thoughts from her work. Her tutor, an impoverished gentlewoman, would under-

take the cultivation of manners befitting the best society, and would mold her literary taste by reading to her from the English classics, in addition to her regular instruction.

"I don't say it will be so very much fun for six months," Warren owned frankly. "But we both think it would be a good idea for you to work for all you are worth at the start, and make all the progress possible. And when once you—well, when the rough edges are smoothed off a little, you can come to town and mix in a little fun with the day's work. What do you think of the idea?"

Agatha's answer was a shake of her head.

"Too strenuous a program, is it?" Warren looked disappointed at her lack of ambition. "Well, it isn't necessary to travel at such a pace. Both Forbes and I felt it would be more encouraging to you in the long run, if your advancement was so rapid that you couldn't help realizing it."

"Yes, that would be better if—but it won't work. Thank you. It's kind of you, but I—I can't go away."

"Away? Do you mean away from this hole in the woods?"

Agatha nodded with no attempt to defend her native place against his sneers.

"This home of yours, where a nice kid like Howard is forbidden to speak of you, and where older men look scared when your name is mentioned and say they never heard of you?"

"You said all that before." Agatha had turned rather white. "And it won't do any good to say it again."

Warren studied her averted face, a pensive face at that moment. He had a confused certainty that he had been too hard on her. He had only spoken the truth and for her good, but he had overdone it. He had been brutal.

"Hephzibah," he said suddenly, a new gentleness in his voice, "I know what's the matter with you. You're in love."

There was something so virginal in her protesting recoil that he had to stop a moment for breath. Yet a quality in the movement gave him an odd conviction of her innate fineness, in spite of that chapter in her past he found it hard to forget.

"There's no other explanation, Hephzibah." He tried to speak lightly without any great degree of

success. "When a girl of your sort sticks to a place of this sort, like a barnacle to a ship's bottom, it's as sure as shooting that there's a man in the case. Come, Hephzibah, own up."

She lifted her chin in a regal way she had—an incongruous motion in a country girl who "worked out"—and looked at him squarely. With a little thrill he saw that her eyes had filled again. And though she did not speak, those brimming eyes seemed a brave, frank avowal that his surmise had hit the mark.

"Well, Hephzibah, I'm glad you aren't going to need our help—Forbes' and mine—in order to be happy. I hope your young man knows he's lucky." He was astonished at the keenness of the pang which marked this formal renunciation. "When is it to be, Hephzibah?"

"Why, it's not—you don't understand—I'm not going to be married."

Warren sat up straight. "The devil, you're not," he said, his voice harshly cynical.

The girl rose and stamped her foot on the grass. The soft turf swallowed the sound, but the passionate gesture was not less impressive because noiseless. "You hush!" she said. "Don't you dare to think

things like that about him. He's perfect. He never harmed anybody, never! And for you to dare to blacken him with your beastly thoughts just because I've been fool enough to care."

Swayed by unprecedented emotion, Warren rose to his feet. In her earlier anger the girl had been merely a lovely virago. Now, in her furious defense of the man he had apparently misjudged, she was superb. Warren felt himself swept from his moorings.

"Very well, Hephzibah. I'll take your word for it that he's all right."

"He doesn't know. He doesn't even dream. There's— He loves some one else."

"Don't, Hephzibah. Poor little girl! What a damned muddle life is." He was fumbling for his card.

"Can you write, dear?"

"After a fashion." All in a minute she was another woman, with radiant mischief peering out of her eyes.

"Here's my address on this card. If you should change your mind, write me. I hope and believe you will. Just because one man is blind, it doesn't follow that there's nothing else in life."

She gave a slight start, looking at him obliquely, the mischief quite gone from her eyes. But she accepted his card, and then of her own accord gave him her hand. "You have been good to take so much trouble," she said. "Thank you." The two had changed markedly since the dialogue under the elm tree began. The girl's hostility had vanished as completely as the man's condescension.

On his way back to the city that night, Warren evolved the theory that Hephzibah was originally of gentle blood. That accounted for the quality of her beauty, for something in her manner suggesting one accustomed to homage rather than to service. Warren was inclined to believe it also explained a singular fact which impressed him more as he thought over the events of the afternoon than it had at the time. There could be no question but that in moments of extreme excitement, a certain uncouthness disappeared from her speech and manner, and she lapsed, so to speak, into the idioms of her presumably cultured forebears. In Warren's opinion this cast a most interesting side-light on the subject of heredity.

CHAPTER XI

A WILFUL MAN MUST HAVE HIS WAY

THOUGH there was no likelihood of another letter from Julia for a week at least, Forbes showed an abnormal interest in the contents of the mail bag, and Agatha guessed he was expecting to hear from Warren. She, too, found herself anxiously anticipating the arrival of the letter addressed in the vigorous hand which in some obscure way was so suggestive of the man's personality. When it came four days after that unique dialogue under the elm tree, and the duty of reading it devolved upon herself, Agatha's heart beat suffocatingly.

But as it proved, all her thrills were anticipatory. The letter itself contained nothing she did not already know, and that little was told tersely and obscurely, evidently with the intention of preventing Miss Kent, the probable reader, from learning that her counsel had been ignored. With

businesslike brevity Warren stated that he attended to the matter they had discussed the previous week. He, Forbes, was correct in his conjecture as to the identity of the party who had done him the service he had spoken of, but said party had turned his proposition down flat. "And now that our consciences are clear," Warren wrote, "the only thing left is to drop the whole matter. Hope the unpleasant effect of your treatments has worn off and that your eyes are feeling better. R. W."

It was plain from the expression of Forbes' face that he shared Agatha's uncomplimentary opinion of the communication in question. The remainder of the day he was frowningly contemplative, resisting all efforts to draw him into conversation. For the first time Agatha saw in his face lines suggesting a determination akin to stubbornness.

By morning his manner showed the relief of having reached a decision. Agatha was not unprepared to have him say at the conclusion of the morning meal, "Miss Kent, when you have a little time I would like to have a talk with you."

"I can come now."

"There's no hurry—no especial hurry, that is. Any time this forenoon."

But Agatha's curiosity was awakened. She conducted him out upon the porch, ensconced him in a comfortable chair, and seated herself beside him. As a preliminary, he took her hand and kissed it.

"I must begin with a confession, my dear lady. I have been keeping a secret from you, in fact more than one."

"Dear me! And I thought you had accepted me as mother confessor."

"So I have. I decided not to tell you for fear of worrying you. But the truth is that I came near walking over the cliff one afternoon, when I was out with Howard, and ending my troubles by breaking my neck."

Agatha succeeded in expressing a sufficient degree of shocked horror in her exclamation.

Forbes patted her hand reassuringly. "But I didn't, you see. My life was saved in a conventionally romantic way. A beautiful girl flung herself into my arms, and when she could get her breath, gave me a terrific scolding."

"Oh!" Agatha looked at him with unfeigned interest. "How did you know she was beautiful? Did Howard tell you?"

"No, Warren."

"Oh!" She seemed a little disappointed. "But he wasn't there, was he?"

"No, but he'd told me about her. And I think I should have known anyway."

"How?" Again he noted the animation in her tone.

"I'm not quite sure. Perhaps a blind man develops a sort of sixth sense. Anyway, as I stood there with my arms about her—it was necessary in the circumstances, and you needn't look shocked as I suspect you're doing—I had as vivid an impression of youth and beauty as if I'd seen her."

"More so, probably," amended Agatha joyously.

"No, not if Warren's right. He says she's something extraordinary. Can't you guess who it was?"

"I believe that Mr. Warren"—Agatha seemed to be searching her memory for details— "talked rather extravagantly about Hephzibah."

"Yes, Hephzibah was the girl. And that puts quite a new light on Warren's plan for educating her, don't you see?"

"No, I don't." Agatha's brevity implied distaste for the subject.

"Well, I do. A man's chance interest in a pretty girl may be perfectly innocent and unobjectionable,

but you can't compare it with what one feels for the woman who has saved one's life."

"I told you that she wanted to be left alone. I told you that it would be kinder."

"Wait, please." Under the deference of his manner, she perceived a resolution that was adamant. "I've told you only one of the secrets that I have kept from you. Here's the other. When I was in town I saw Warren and we laid plans for taking Hephzibah's case in hand, regular uplift proposition, don't you know. Warren was to see her and arrange matters. We had everything settled. We had a governess selected and had decided on a little seaside place for them to stay until she was presentable. Warren was going to ask a girl he knows to buy her a suitable outfit."

"I don't wonder you've been blue," Agatha said in tones of soft reproach. "Planning all this out and not a word to me."

To her surprise he blushed high. "No," he said after a moment, "I've been down in the depths, God knows, but not for that reason. I thought—well, you seemed to feel so strongly on the subject of not interfering with Hephzibah, that I didn't want to bother you."

"And now you do? Is that why you're telling me about it?"

"I'm telling you because I want your help." He set his jaw grimly as he faced her. "I left Warren to engineer the thing and he's bungled it."

"It wasn't his fault." Agatha evinced a commendable eagerness not to be unjust to the absent. "When Hephzibah has made up her mind, trying to change it is like going against a stone wall."

"Possibly. But I shan't feel satisfied till I've tried my persuasive powers on her." Forbes sat waiting for some comment from Agatha, and when none was offered, explained firmly, "I want an interview with her."

Still Agatha did not speak. She was beginning to feel an aversion to Hephzibah Diggs which amounted to positive hatred. That talk with Warren had been trying enough, with his repeated references to some scandalous episode in her past. But for reasons perfectly clear to Agatha herself, the interview with Forbes promised to be vastly worse.

"Well?" Forbes was puzzled by her silence. "Had she better come here? Or shall I have Howard take me to her home?"

"Oh, no." The dismay in Agatha's voice nega-

tived the last suggestion conclusively. Forbes found her tremors a trifle irritating. He had to remind himself that she was an old lady, and that for many years her will had been supreme in her little circle. He found her hand and patted it affectionately. He was beginning to think that these sentimental attentions counted more with elderly women than with younger ones.

"Well, then, we'll have her here. Will you send her word, some time to-day?"

"I'm not sure she'll come."

"Then I'll go to her." His obstinacy showed in his voice. "I tell you I'm going to talk to that girl. She's got a chance at last. She's young and it's inconceivable that she should turn down such an offer if she really understood it."

"That's the sort of girl she is. Worthless, trifling."

Forbes withdrew his hand from hers. To her amazement Agatha saw she had really offended him. And now to her dislike of Hephzibah was added a preposterous jealousy. She, Agatha Kent, had devoted herself to Forbes all summer only to have him act like a spoiled child when she ventured a criticism of a girl he had met only on one occasion,

a girl with a past, at that. What was Hephzibah to him or he to Hephzibah, that for her sake he was ready to affront his father's old friend and his own?"

"I shan't need Howard this morning," remarked Forbes pleasantly but with a relentless holding to his purpose which forced her to realize the hopelessness of altering his intention. "So if you please, ask him to take the message. The girl may be all that you say, and my interest and effort may all be wasted, but I prefer to see for myself."

"Very well," said Agatha swallowing. She perceived that he considered her a narrow-minded old person, who thought it impossible for a woman to return to the paths of rectitude, after once stepping aside. He would not take her word for Hephzibah. He was determined to interview her for himself. Agatha looked at him with narrowing eyes. Very well! Let him take the consequences.

"I'll see that Hephzibah gets the message," she said with dignity. "I can't answer for results."

"Of course not." Now that he had gained his point, his manner was thoroughly friendly. "I'll take the entire responsibility for the outcome."

Agatha realized that she was dismissed. She went up-stairs feeling out of sorts with Forbes and positively murderous where Hephzibah was concerned. She even played with the thought of having that obtrusive young woman smitten with mortal illness, too sick for the interview Forbes insisted on, and in a few days reaching the end of her brief and troubled life. She dismissed the thought when she realized that Forbes was capable of summoning a physician from the city to attend the patient.

The door of Miss Finch's room was ajar. Miss Finch sat at the table with a sheet of paper spread out before her and a pen in hand. The seriousness of her expression suggested that she was on the point of making her last will and testament.

"Fritz," exclaimed Agatha, appearing in the doorway, "I have a message for you to give Hephzibah Diggs."

Miss Finch looked at her wildly.

"Will you please say that Mr. Forbes would like to see her some time to-day. Say it's very important."

As Miss Finch continued to stare, Agatha showed signs of impatience. "Well, why don't you begin?"

"Begin what, Agatha?"

"Why, say what I've just told you, that Mr. Forbes wants to see me this afternoon."

Miss Finch groaned and shook her head. "Oh, Agatha, it seems so wicked."

"Wicked! If that's not unreasonable. Here I am taking all the pains to come up-stairs to you, to have you give me the message so I won't need to stretch the truth the least little bit, and then you talk as if I were an ordinary prevaricator, without a conscience."

Miss Finch quailed before Agatha's simulated indignation. "Oh, if you look at it that way," she replied feebly and made an effort to recall the message. "Hephzibah, Mr. Forbes wants to see you to-day."

"Tell me it's very important," prompted Agatha.

"It's very important," Miss Finch repeated, and looked on the point of bursting into tears.

"I'll be there at three o'clock," replied Agatha in the person of Hephzibah. Then her gaze fell on the letters lying open on the table and she temporarily forgot her own perplexities in the perennial feminine interest in a love-affair.

"Oh, Fritz," she exclaimed, coming closer.

"You're writing the letter, aren't you? Which one is it to be?"

Miss Finch looked at the blank sheet before her with an expression equally blank.

"Agatha," she hesitated, "it almost seems to me—at least don't you think Mr. Doolittle is rather the best-looking?"

Agatha pondered the question with the seriousness its importance deserved.

"I rather think he is, Fritz. The deacon is much too fat. My ideal of manly beauty isn't broad enough to include a fat man. It's surprising how some people thrive on bereavement."

Miss Finch fidgeted with her pen. "But perhaps the deacon is a little more careful about his appearance."

Again Agatha acquiesced. "Mr. Doolittle is far from particular. I've seen him in the village with only one suspender, and the usefulness of that dependent on one anemic-looking safety-pin. I've honestly trembled for fear of what might happen. The deacon's away in the lead in the matter of clothes."

Again Miss Finch looked nervously at the paper before her and then surprised Agatha by laying down her pen.

"I rather thought I'd write them to-day," she said. "It's been—well, not long, but quite a time since their letters came, and I thought—"

She fell into an indeterminate silence, and Agatha finished the sentence for her. "Of course they're getting impatient. It's cruel to keep them on the rack this way. Why don't you put them out of their misery, Fritz?"

"Why, I don't want to hurry, Agatha. I must wait to be sure. There's some nice things about each one and some that aren't so nice. I'll have to think it over a while yet."

Agatha was watching the little woman keenly. "Fritz," she asked with unusual, gentle gravity, "are you sure you want either of them? Don't you think you'd be happier just to stay on with me?"

Miss Finch regarded her interrogator with evident amazement. "Why, Agatha, I might never have another chance."

This was too true to question. Agatha remained silent.

"I sometimes can't help wishing," Miss Finch owned plaintively, "that there hadn't been two. That's what makes it so puzzling—having to choose. And there seems so much to be said on both sides.

But to refuse them both—why, Agatha, it would be flying in the face of Providence."

Agatha said no more. Leaving Miss Finch to her dreams, she went up to the garret to find an appropriate costume for Hephzibah in her forthcoming momentous interview. She felt she could act her rôle with more spirit if dressed appropriately to the part. Agatha did not underestimate the difficulty of her proposed masquerade. It was an easy matter to evolve a personality sufficiently consistent to deceive Warren, for Warren had never met the dignified and elderly spinster, Miss Agatha Kent. Forbes, on the contrary, had spent hours in that lady's company nearly every day through the summer, and knew every inflection of her voice. The forthcoming interview with Forbes presented any number of terrifying possibilities.

She had a word with him at a suitable interval after their late conversation. "She's coming."

"Good!" he cried triumphantly. "Did Howard go?"

"No. Miss Finch was going to see her, anyway. She'll be here at three."

"Good!" said Forbes again. He turned to her with that mingled gentleness and resolution which somehow revealed him in a new light.

"Now, my dear friend, I'm going to ask a favor of you. Promise me you won't misunderstand."

"I'll try not," she said faintly, and her heart misgave her.

"Promise me that you'll leave us to ourselves when we have our little talk. I know your interest in Hephzibah's future—"

In her relief Agatha became jocular. "No, you don't know. You can't. Her welfare means as much to me as my own."

"I'm not doubting that. Please don't misunderstand me. But sometimes I think these sensitive natures can open up better to a stranger than to a friend. And the fact that I'm blind may be a help to her."

"Yes," agreed Agatha with unmistakable sincerity, "I'm pretty sure it will be."

"There's something mysterious about that girl." Forbes continued. "The way she refuses to listen to propositions that are all clearly for her good, puzzles me. I'm convinced that if I can have her to myself an hour or so, I'll get at the root of the trouble. Anyway it's worth trying."

Relieved from the terrifying certainty that he was about to ask her to chaperon them during the inter-

view, Agatha had almost ceased to dread the prospective ordeal. But prudence suggested the advisability of seeming a little hurt. "I shouldn't have interfered in any way," she assured him plaintively. "Since you've set your heart on talking to Hephzibah, I should have sat quietly in the background and not said a word."

"Better not," Forbes interposed hastily. "Let me have my way this time. And when we talk it over afterward, I'll tell you every word that was said as nearly as I can remember."

CHAPTER XII

HEPHZIBAH TURNS THE TABLES

HEPHZIBAH DIGGS was prompt. As the grandfather's clock in the hall struck three, Agatha advanced to the French window opening on the porch, and said in her natural voice, "She's here, Mr. Forbes."

Forbes smiled approval. "Send her around, please, Miss Kent." His manner suggested that the difficulties in the way of his philanthropic plan were now a thing of the past.

The clumping footsteps that presently announced the approach of his visitor took him back a trifle. There was no particular reason why Hephzibah should not be an ordinary clumsy country girl, in heavy shoes that clattered noisily as she moved, but somehow he had not expected it. He rose and stood awaiting her.

The voice was more unexpected than her heavy tread. It made him wince. He remembered that Warren likened it to the melodious notes of a guinea

fowl and he appreciated the aptness of the comparison. There was no reason why Hephzibah Diggs should not talk through her nose, and in a harsh, strident, generally unpleasant tone. But the fact that she did so, though he had been abundantly forewarned, took him by surprise.

"Miss Kent says you've got something to say to me."

Thus Hephzibah announced her presence. And Forbes, hastily summoning a smile, and resolutely excluding his pain from his voice, extended a cordial hand.

"I'm very glad to meet you, Miss Hephzibah. Won't you sit down? I think there's a chair near."

"I'll wait on myself, don't you bother none." A grating noise indicated that a chair was being dragged across the floor of the porch into convenient nearness to his own. A plumping sound gave evidence that Hephzibah had seated herself.

The picture in the rustic chair deserved a more appreciative audience than a blind man. Hephzibah wore a costume best described as a medley, since garments originally the property of Miss Finch and Howard, as well as her own, contributed to the startling effect. A pair of Howard's outgrown shoes

accounted for her clumsy tread. She wore a little bonnet which Miss Finch had discarded after some dozen years of service, and which seemed genuinely scandalized at finding itself atop Agatha's brazenly assertive mass of hair. A very short calico skirt, also the property of Miss Finch, and a sky-blue silk waist, evidently designed for festive wear, completed the grotesque costume. Just why it should have given Agatha confidence in playing her rôle, she knew as little as any one.

Forbes commented pleasantly on the weather as some such preliminary skirmishing seemed necessary before coming to the point. He had resolved on establishing a friendly understanding between Hephzibah and himself, before making the offer which, he realized, might readily arouse the suspicion of a girl who knew by bitter experience that men are not always to be trusted. He was inclined to suspect Warren of lacking tact, startling her by his failure to employ *finesse*. He did not take himself into his own confidence fully enough to admit that he was also sparring for time in the effort to recover his poise. It was singular that he had received so different an impression of Hephzibah in the brief, bewildering interview which had opened

by his clasping her in his arms, and ended by her refusal to tell her name. He had to remind himself that on the springy turf her clumsy tread would be soundless, and that the gasping whisper in which she spoke gave him no clue as to the quality of her voice. Still, if Warren's letter had not expressly assured him that Hephzibah was his mysterious rescuer, he would have felt sure that he had been mistaken.

Hephzibah was in full accord with his favorable opinion of the weather. She expressed her agreement so heartily that he winced again, and conquered an impulse to tell her that it was unnecessary to speak so loud.

"I suppose," he began, deciding that after all it would be better to waive further introductory remarks, "that you must have wondered why I wanted to see you."

"I didn't bother about that none," replied Hephzibah. "I've had a lot to do with sick folks, and I know they're likely to take 'most any sort of notion into their heads."

Forbes reddened smartly. He felt as if he had been slapped. Clearly tact was not in Hephzibah's line.

"I've heard a good deal about you, first and last," he assured her pleasantly. "And of course my interest in you was increased by what happened near Indian Rock the other afternoon. I'm not going to talk about that for I know you would rather I wouldn't."

"Oh, don't mind me," Hephzibah returned comfortably. "You can say anything you like. You can't make me mad."

Forbes hesitated. There is no doubt that on the moment he acquitted Miss Kent of a certain charge to which she had been given no chance to plead guilty. He realized that women sometimes understood one another better than a mere man might hope to do. But he had put his hand to the plow with the intention of proving Warren's unfitness in matters requiring diplomacy, and he had no intention of turning back.

Deliberately and with carefully chosen words, Forbes explained to Hephzibah the plan he had evolved for her regeneration. He went more into detail than Warren had done. He traced her future years from the present modest start, up to the time when she should bear the stamp of culture, and be able to hold her own in the best society. The pic-

ture that he drew seemed to him an attractive one. He showed himself not altogether lacking in a knowledge of the opposite sex, by the emphasis he placed upon the friend of Warren's to whom had been assigned the responsibility of selecting a suitable wardrobe for Hephzibah.

He did not pause till he was pleasantly confident that he had done the subject justice. He turned his sightless eyes upon her expectantly. Hephzibah said nothing. There was a chilling quality in her protracted silence.

"Well?" questioned Forbes, and though he had been so favorably impressed by his putting of the case, he spoke a little anxiously. "What do you think of it all?"

Hephzibah laughed unmusically.

"Well, I let you go on, just so's to get it off your chest. There ain't nothing to it, not so far as I can see. The clothes would be nice enough, but if I had to study all the time and have some dame bossing me my days off and all, I'd pay for 'em dear."

"But wouldn't you like to be educated?"

"Laws, no. I never hankered to be a schoolteacher. I'd rather cook any day in the week."

By this time Forbes was convinced that Miss Kent

was right. Something was lacking in Hephzibah. He realized that he himself had been influenced more than he knew by Warren's extravagance, and Warren, it was apparent, had been swept off his feet by the girl's fresh beauty. Just how to explain the impression he himself had formed of her that day when she swung her lithe body between him and mortal peril, Forbes did not know. She had said little, and that with difficulty, because of her breathless condition, and yet the impression he had formed of her was infinitely removed from the truth. He felt now that he had made a mistake, and that Hephzibah was not of the fiber to take on polish readily. He would show his gratitude in some more appropriate way than by attempting her education. But since he had blundered into this rather absurd situation, there was nothing left but to go through with it.

"You do not have to use your education in teaching school, unless you wish to," he explained patiently. "But it will fit you for a better social position." He realized that this was over her head and kindly simplified it. "I mean that the more you learn, the nicer friends you will have and the more things you will find to interest you."

"I know enough now," Hephzibah insisted calmly, "for anybody that ain't a teacher. When I went to district school I learned to read and write and figure, and I 'most always stood up till near the last when we had spelling matches. Oh, I've got an education all right."

"Possibly, my child, it would be better to rely on the judgment of some one else." His manner was patiently paternal.

Hephzibah Diggs shuffled her feet noisily. "I guess I know enough to 'tend to my own affairs," she said, her tone truculent.

"I'm not so sure about that, Hephzibah. I think you would do much better to take advice."

"How'd you like it yourself if folks you didn't know came butting in, telling you how to manage your business?"

"If it was meant kindly, I should be grateful."

"Oh, very well." He could hear that she was breathing hard. "Then I'll tell you that for a sensible man you're making as big a botch of your affairs as anybody I ever knew of."

Forbes was unfeignedly astonished. "Why, Hephzibah, you don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't I, though. I know about that girl of yours, and what a fool she's making of you."

Forbes caught his breath. Then he realized that it was beneath his dignity to be angry. "I think it is hardly necessary," he said stiffly, "to discuss that subject, Hephzibah."

"Oh, no! you can stick your finger into my pie all you want to. You can tell me I ought to go to some place I never heard of, with somebody I never knew, and do everything I hate for years and years, but when I say one thing about your girl, it's hardly necessary to discuss that subject."

The last words were given with what he realized was an excellent imitation of his own air of dignified aloofness. This amused him and had the additional effect of mollifying his irritation. "But I am interfering in your affairs, because I have your interests at heart," he said very kindly.

"Same here. I hate like the mischief to see a nice gentleman made a fool of by a vain, silly girl with about as much brains as a cockroach, and as much heart as a pancake."

This description of Julia, though he would have indignantly denied that it had the remotest resemblance to truth, roused him to the realization that

this uncouth young woman knew more of his personal affairs than she had any right to know.

"Hephzibah," he said sternly, "I don't understand where you could have secured information about any friends of mine. Surely Miss Kent—"

For all her faults, Hephzibah was capable of magnanimity. On one critical occasion Miss Kent had sacrificed Hephzibah's reputation to save herself, and Hephzibah was under no obligation to spare hers. Yet without hesitation she threw herself into the breach. "I listened," she explained quickly.

"You mean when Miss Kent was reading me my letters?" His flushed face told that he was not disposed to belittle her eavesdropping.

"Yes, and when you talked things over. I heard enough to know that you'd better use the brains the Lord gave you to manage your own affairs. Why don't you put it up to that girl of yours that she can take you or leave you?"

"Really, Hephzibah—"

"Oh, it's all right for you to come along and pry into my business, and tell me what *I'm* to do. But when I turn the tables you squirm. Funny what a difference it makes whose foot the shoe's on."

Forbes subsided. Under his feeling of bewilder-

ment was a vague suspicion that perhaps there was something in Hephzibah's point of view.

"In the first place," continued this intrepid young woman, "she showed she was no good when she throwed you down like she did. She was going to marry you, wasn't she? And if she cared enough about you for that, it was up to her to stand by you when trouble came. Pretty kind of wife she'd have made if she turned her back the minute hard luck struck you."

Forbes remembered vaguely that Miss Kent had once said something similar. He wondered that two human beings so unlike should have the same viewpoint.

"You got off easy," Hephzibah continued. "You might have married her. When she showed herself up for what she was, you'd ought to have got down on your marrow-bones and thanked the Lord. But look at you! Instead, you keep on telling her how much you love her and that a yellow streak don't matter—in a woman."

Forbes suddenly realized that he could endure no more. He could not listen longer to these preposterous statements. But underneath his panic of anger, something whispered that he shrank from lis-

tening longer to Hephzibah's frantic speech, not because she was uttering slanders against Julia, but because what she said was true.

He struck the arm of his chair with his clenched fist. "Stop!" he said in a voice unlike his own. "I won't listen."

"All right," said Hephzibah Diggs. "But what's sauce for the goose—"

She stopped, starting to her feet. The blow from Forbes' fist had loosened the arm of the chair in which he sat. It had bounced out of place and then slipped back again, catching his finger as it returned to base. It was his sudden startling pallor that checked Hephzibah's fluency.

"Can you help me a little—Hephzibah?" Forbes' voice was faint, his lips blue. "My hand—seems caught."

Hephzibah's clattering haste was too late to save him from ignominious faintness. He had not been well since his trip to the city, and the shock of the pain was too much for his nerves. She caught the arm of the chair and wrenched it savagely away, just as his head fell over against her shoulder. She released the imprisoned hand, and slipping her arm about him kept his limp body from sliding to the

floor. Upon his white face, she saw, conscience-stricken, there seemed to rest an expression of piteous bewilderment.

Forbes reviving found himself indoors. He was stretched on the couch in the living-room. The odor of camphor was much in evidence and his hair felt damp, as if he had been taking a dip in the surf. Some one was chafing his hand. "Hephzibah," he said faintly.

The voice of Miss Kent answered him, speaking in a muffled fashion, as if she had a cold in her head.

"She's gone. That horrible girl is gone. She shall never come near you again."

Even after his late experience the adjective seemed to indicate prejudice. But he did not press the point, as there was another matter he wished cleared up.

"Did I frighten you terribly?"

"Yes—I was frightened." Her voice shook as if she wanted to cry again. "You're not so strong as I thought. I shall have to take better care of you. I blame myself—terribly."

This was unreasonable, but he did not stop to argue the case. "Was that why you kissed me?" he asked. "I didn't seem to come to all at once; con-

sciousness came in waves and receded, you know, and once I felt sure some one kissed my cheek, and a big tear splashed down—"

Miss Kent spoke hastily. "Oh, that was only part of your dreaming. Fainting people often have such fancies."

"Very likely," Forbes agreed. "You see, I don't know much about fainting. It never happened to me but once before." He turned his head on his damp pillow and lapsed into silence. It was the part of discretion, perhaps, to leave Miss Kent under the impression that the kiss was an illusion, due to his semi-conscious state, but he knew better. It was as real as music, or flame, or electricity. It had certain characteristics of all three.

It must have been Hephzibah.

CHAPTER XIII

CONGRATULATIONS ARE IN ORDER

MURRAY PRENDERGAST had proposed. The summer sport had become dead earnest. Julia wrote Forbes the full details, explaining that the young man was awaiting her answer, and that she had asked two weeks in which to come to a decision. Apparently Julia, like Miss Finch, felt that to refuse Prendergast would be flying in the face of Providence, even though accepting him seemed a harsh necessity.

" 'It's not what you and I dreamed of in the dear old days,' " wrote Julia. " 'Oh, Burton, how far away those happy times seem when we sat hand in hand and planned our future. How merciless life is, Burton! Is there some dark fate in whose hands we are only puppets?' "

Agatha broke off in her reading to lift a scarlet face. "Must I go on with this?"

"Do you mean that you're tired?" Forbes' voice was self-controlled but in his pale cheeks a pulse beat like a trip hammer. Even his tears would not have hurt her like that palpitating spot over which his will was powerless.

"Yes, I *am* tired. I'm terribly tired of the people who talk about fate when it's all their own cowardice, and pity themselves for losing what they deliberately threw away."

"It's a matter of view-point," said Forbes tonelessly. "If that's all, I'm afraid I must ask you to go on. I—I could hardly have Howard read it." All at once his white cheek showed a stain of red, as if the mere thought that any eyes but his own should see that letter was humiliating beyond endurance.

Julia's letter was as long as usual and decidedly more sentimental. She surrendered herself with abandon to the luxury of heart-break. She recalled a number of tender episodes, and wondered pathetically why fate could not have spared lovers so fond. To Agatha, Julia's melancholy was a theatrical make-believe on the face of it, as much a pose as her pretense of affection. Agatha did her best to spoil the effect of the letter by reading rapidly, and in a

monotonous sing-song, but she could not keep her eyes from the face of the man before her, and she saw that every tender memory the missive evoked found response in his tortured heart.

She wound up breathless and hot and trembling uncontrollably. Forbes thanked her with a formal courtesy that added to her pain, for it seemed to set her at a distance. She wanted to put her arms about him, and cry over him, and tell him that the hurt would not last. Then she remembered with bitterness that she was a withered old woman in whose heart the fires of love had burned to ashes, long, long before, if indeed they had ever been kindled.

"I'd like a sheet of paper, please," Forbes said with the same laborious politeness. "I'll scrawl a line myself."

"What are you going to tell her?"

His air of surprise at the question indicated that there was but one answer. "What is there to say, except to wish her all happiness?"

"You're not going to blame her, then?"

"God forbid." He took the sheet she gave him, wrote upon it rapidly and folding it across, handed it back to her. "I'll have to ask you to direct the envelope for me," he said, still heart-breakingly pa-

tient. "I can write well enough for Julia's eyes, but not for Uncle Sam's."

Agatha did not reply. The breeze, always fresh upon the porch, had parted the folded sheet, and her reluctant gaze caught the signature, "Always yours, B. F." She turned away her eyes and caught her breath. "Always yours." That was the cruelty of it. Julia would marry Murray Prendergast and yet keep her hold on the heart of the man she had abandoned in his need. Her selfishness could not alter his loyalty. If the letter just read did not reveal her to him in her incomparable egotism, nothing ever would.

Agatha's heart bled for him in his white resignation. If he had done anything but sit there like a man under sentence of death, she would have felt equal to the occasion. But this white suffering terrified her. She dared not trust herself to look at him, for her eyes ran over at the sight of his drawn face. She stared out over the serene landscape as she said unsteadily, "Did you ask her to wait?"

"Wait? Why wait?"

"For you to get well, of course. If she's so fond of you, she ought to be able to wait a year or two until you've recovered your sight."

He shrugged his shoulders without replying, but the gesture revealed more than hopelessness, something alarmingly akin to indifference. And though Agatha knew that in the nature of the case, this mood could not last, it added fuel to her hatred of the shallow, selfish woman who was responsible. In her serener moments Agatha comforted herself by the reflection that however unhappy Forbes might be without Julia, he was bound to be more unhappy with her. But in the present crisis that consolation failed her. She was swayed by the desire to give him, at all costs, the thing he wanted.

Her plan was formed in an instant. Agatha was aware that with many women as with all men, undisputed possession tends to indifference. Forbes' one chance with Julia, she implicitly believed, was to awaken in the mind of that complacent young woman a doubt as to whether her unfortunate lover was in reality hers always, as he declared himself. Forbes, who scorned to ask even for a few months' delay, could not be expected to lend himself to the scheme unfolding in Agatha's fancy. Some friend must do for him what he would not stoop to do for himself.

As Agatha walked to the writing-desk, holding

the folded sheet pinched shut with thumb and finger, for fear of again reading the assurance of Forbes' unalterable devotion, there was something oddly gallant in her bearing. Her keen common sense was temporarily quiescent. Her heart had things all its own way. Since the prospect of losing Julia irrevocably had graven that terrible look upon Forbes' face, she must find some way of making Julia hesitate to engage herself to Prendergast. There was but one chance, as far as Agatha could see. She resolved to take it.

No one could consider it singular, Agatha decided, as she seated herself, if an amiable old lady should send a note of congratulation to the girl to whom she had penned so many communications. Agatha almost snatched the stationery from the drawer. She had a most unnatural fear of losing her courage by delay. At the moment she lacked neither courage nor inspiration.

"My Dear Miss Studley:

"I'm sure you will pardon a line from a woman old enough to be your grandmother."

Agatha paused, bit her pen and frowned. "I am, of course," she told herself, with that odd impres-

sion of dual identity, which at times made it difficult for her to remember whether she was nineteen or sixty-seven. "But it isn't worth while to make her feel so youthful." She reached for a fresh sheet of paper and made a new start.

"My Dear Miss Studley:

"I am sure you will pardon a line from a woman old enough to be your mother, who has come to feel right well acquainted with you through Mr. Forbes, and through reading your letters aloud to him. I want to be one of the first to congratulate you, and to wish you all the happiness you deserve."

Her pen poised in air, Agatha combated the temptation to underline the last two words. "It's exactly what I *do* wish her," she mused. "All the happiness she deserves, not a bit more nor a bit less. Poor wretch, it's an inhuman sort of wish but I can't help it, and I'm afraid she won't realize that I'm consigning her to Purgatory."

The pen resumed its hurried scratching. It was not necessary for Agatha to wait for inspiration. Words came in a flood.

"Some people might blame you for your engagement, so soon after breaking with Mr. Forbes, but I assure you I do not feel that way. I am unmarried

myself, and I know that when a woman loses one chance, she may never get another. Mr. Forbes might die or change his mind. I think you are very sensible to make sure of Mr. Prendergast while he is in the mood. Whatever ill-natured people may say about you, I for one will always take this view."

Agatha drew a long breath of pure satisfaction. She had undertaken the letter with the sole thought of rushing to Forbes' assistance in his extremity. But virtue was proving its own reward. She was enjoying herself immensely. Her sense of satisfaction made her reckless. When again the pen began moving down the sheet, it wrote more than Agatha had originally intended.

"I suppose you sometimes feel a little anxious about Mr. Forbes and his future. It is hard for us women to get rid of a feeling of responsibility for the men who love us. And I am glad I can set your natural misgivings at rest. It would not be a great surprise to me if you should hear of another engagement in the near future. Yet Mr. Forbes is a very honorable gentleman, I need not assure you, and as long as you were unmarried, or at least not engaged, he would not have permitted himself to become entangled with any other woman. But this summer he has spent a great deal of time with a girl who lives in the neighborhood. She is considered extremely pretty and though that does not mean anything to him at present, it is evident that he finds

her company most enjoyable. Indeed I believe he is more interested in her than he himself realizes, while the fact that she has devoted practically her entire summer to him, seems to indicate that it would not be difficult to bring her to think of him as something more than a friend. And I've noticed that she seems quite responsive when he pats her hand or holds it, as he has a way of doing. I suppose he feels that an invalid has a right to some little privileges. On one occasion he did so far forget himself as to take her in his arms, but the circumstances were quite unusual, and I saw to it that the indiscretion was never repeated. I always manage to be around when the young people are together, for, as our beloved Longfellow expresses it, 'Man is fire and woman is tow.'

"I'm afraid I am a poor one to talk about discretion when I am writing you all this. I'm sure if Mr. Forbes knew he would be very much put out with me, and so I am going to ask you not to speak of this if you should happen to write again. Very likely Mr. Prendergast will not approve of your corresponding with an old flame, and who can blame him, for as Will Carlton says so ably, 'She that is false to one can be the same with two,' or words to that effect. I'm afraid my memory is not what it once was.

"Excuse this garrulous letter. How I have run on about Mr. Forbes instead of merely carrying out my first intention, and wishing you the future you so richly deserve. Very truly yours,

"AGATHA KENT."

Agatha re-read the closely written sheets with growing delectation. In every respect they measured up to her anticipations. She had expressed her sentiments toward Julia with a plainness she would hardly have believed possible in a letter superficially observing the amenities of civilized life. She had planted some barbed suggestions where she flattered herself they would render the reader most uncomfortable. But that was not all. It is a thoroughly human weakness to wish to eat one's cake and have it too, and Agatha suspected Julia of having more than her share of this familiar characteristic. Julia, so Agatha argued, saw herself the irreproachable wife of a wealthy man, enjoying all the dignities incident to the Prendergast social sphere, and at the same time the object of another man's hopeless adoration. The doubt Agatha's letter suggested, that she could continue without a rival to rule in Forbes' affections, was, in Agatha's opinion, Forbes' one chance to keep her from the decisive step.

Agatha enclosed Forbes' brief communication with her own lengthy one and despatched it by Howard before qualms could assail her as to the advisability of dropping this particular bomb into

the enemy's camp. She knew vaguely that a host of suggestions stood marshaled at the back of her brain, ready to demonstrate conclusively her lack of wisdom. If Julia did not choose to consider the letter confidential, trouble would ensue. The fact that Agatha saw all Forbes' letters, and that he knew only what she chose to tell him, gave her but slight advantage, since she confessed to scruples in the matter of other people's letters. And if it had the result she believed possible, and Julia refused to engage herself to Prendergast till Forbes' recovery was certain or proved impossible, Agatha could not congratulate herself on having assured her friend's happiness.

"I'm afraid I'm a good deal like a mother who gives the baby the scissors to play with because he cries for them. Only with a baby you can distract its attention, and make it think that something else is just as good, and with Burton Forbes that wouldn't work."

And then having satisfied herself by peering through the window that Forbes' face still wore the dazed look of a creature incomprehensibly wounded, Agatha threw herself upon the couch and sought the relief of tears. She wept as she did everything else.

Hot tears rained down upon the pillow. Sobs shook her. Every now and then mirth got the upper hand and she laughed hysterically, interrupting, though briefly, the Niobe-like activities.

The storm was over as suddenly as it had begun. Agatha rose and regarded her swollen features in the mirror with much disfavor.

"I suppose it's no use to put powder on my nose. It would only look like a strawberry sprinkled with sugar. And anyway, Mr. Forbes can't see what a fright I am."

As if that thought had a miraculously sustaining power, Agatha drew a long breath and passed into the kitchen to help Phemie with the dinner.

CHAPTER XIV

CONFIDENCES

AGATHA had reached the conclusion that Julia was more venal than vain. A full week she had awaited a sign that her ruse had succeeded. For seven creeping days, dry-lipped and with unsteady pulses, she had scanned the mail for a letter directed in Julia's familiar, hateful hand, and in the beginning she could not have told whether there was more of hope or of apprehension in her expectancy.

But now she knew by the way her heart was singing. Her insane attempt to give Forbes the thing he wanted, whatever the consequences, had gloriously failed. She had played a friend's part, if a fool's part, and had not been punished by success. Naturally Forbes' numerous letters had never made the slightest reference to an attractive young girl, who was devoting her summer to rendering his exile tolerable, and such an omission would have awak-

ened doubt in the least suspicious nature. To Agatha, Julia's continued silence, in the face of such facts, was convincing proof that she had thrown up her hand and was out of the game.

Agatha had fought Forbes' depression stubbornly while the week was young, and then as hope strengthened, with an audacious, irresistible gaiety that occasionally swept him off his feet. Never had it seemed so difficult to simulate age. A score of times a day she found it necessary to strangle a peal of girlish laughter, or tone it down to the subdued quaver appropriate to her years. It was incredibly irksome to subject her buoyant feet to the yoke of decorum. Never had she so courted exposure as now when the lightening of her heart impelled her to all sorts of foolish youthful pranks. Miss Finch watched her in dumb fascinated terror. And Forbes despite his abysmal gloom, found himself responding with astonishing frequency to her whirlwind spirits.

She woke early the morning of the eighth day and lay musing, too pleasurably excited to fall asleep again. Julia was out of the way. She had engaged herself deliberately to another man, and now it was not Julia but a radiant memory against which she must pit her wit and beauty. Had Agatha been older

she might have questioned whether this were an occasion for self-congratulation, since the unfading, perfect dream has an undeniable advantage over fading and faulty beauty. But thanks to her inexperience, the removal of Julia from her path left her with a reckless confidence in her star. There was a tangled web to be unraveled, to be sure, before matters were established on a satisfactory footing, but her blithe hopefulness hurdled these grim preliminaries, and busied itself with a future all rose-color.

A sound in the next room roused Agatha from her sanguine self-communion, the plaintive little whine of Miss Finch's creaking rocking chair. Agatha sprang out of bed, and carried her watch to the window. The faint light showed the hour hand still plodding on toward four o'clock, no hour surely for Zaida Finch to be indulging her propensity for rocking chairs.

A white-clad figure, censoriously erect, appeared in Miss Finch's doorway. Miss Finch gasped, jumped, and made a rush for her bed, as if with the hope of persuading her youthful visitor that the sound of footsteps had roused her from peaceful slumbers. Then realizing the futility of evasion,

she stopped short, and stood with hanging head, her air of confusion together with her diminutive figure, giving her the appearance of a naughty child.

"Fritz," began Agatha impressively, "why on earth aren't you asleep?" As she came closer her judicial air changed to consternation. Miss Finch's pale little eyes showed red even in the dim light. Her small nose was redder still. Her thin cheeks were wet with tears.

"Fritz, dear," cried the girl, her voice vibrant with tenderness, "are you sick? Does you head ache? Get into bed and let me make you comfortable. Why didn't you call me? I've been awake an age."

This affectionate concern was too much for Miss Finch's self-control. As she climbed into bed, she gave way to loud sobs. Agatha hung over her, distressed and vaguely self-reproachful, because she had not discovered earlier the urgent need of her presence.

"Don't cry, Fritzie! Shall I get you the hot water bottle, or is it the camphor that you need? Where does it hurt?" She patted the little sob-shaken figure with a motherly hand. Even when not impersonating her great-aunt, Agatha frequently felt years older than Zaida Finch.

It took a minute to elicit an answer. It came finally in a little sniffly whisper.

"My head's all right, Agatha."

"Probably that short-cake disagreed with you. I wondered at the time, if two helps weren't too many, with the whipped cream."

"My stomach's all right, too," declared Miss Finch, a trifle pettishly.

"Then where's the pain?"

Miss Finch deliberated. Her tears gushed afresh. "I—guess it's in my heart. I'm worried, Agatha."

Agatha sat down on the side of the bed, and sighed remorsefully.

"I know it's been a hard summer for you, Fritz. All this deception is very trying for one of your candid temperament. I should mind it frightfully myself if it wasn't for the fun of the thing. But I adored amateur theatricals when I was in boarding-school, and this is exactly the same, except that you have to make up your part as you go along. I knew that you'd been worrying, but I didn't dream how dreadfully you'd taken it to heart."

Miss Finch opened one swollen eye. She looked rather taken aback.

"I don't deny all this deception has worried me,

Agatha. But just now—I was thinking of something else. I'm worried about my own affairs."

For a moment Agatha was nonplused. Miss Finch was one of the people who seem to be without personal "affairs." She had no relatives to die, no money to lose, no friends to disappoint her, no prospects to be overcast. She was painfully immune against loss, by comprehensive lack. Then on Agatha's incredulity flashed the recollection of Deacon Wiggins and James Doolittle. In her absorption with her own concerns she had forgotten that Miss Finch stood at a cross-roads, doubtful which turning to take. "Oh, Fritzie," she cried self-reproachfully, "I hope nothing's gone wrong with your love-affairs."

Miss Finch's grief lost something of its poignancy. Agatha's exclamation seemed to establish her status. It was something to know love's pangs, even though ignorant of its joys. Her husky voice was controlled as she replied, "The trouble is that they haven't gone at all, right or wrong."

"Oh!" Agatha became meditative and Miss Finch's confidences trickled on plaintively, like a sad-hearted brook.

"I got another letter from Deacon Wiggins yes-

terday. He said he guessed his first must have gone astray since he hadn't heard from me. He went over about the same ground as he did in the first letter and he put in a lot of Scripture. It gives one a feeling that a man can be depended on, when he's got so much of the Bible at his tongue's end."

"Well?" Agatha interrupted hopefully.

"Then I met Mr. Doolittle on the road this afternoon and he looked at me real reproachful, and said he was coming to see me in a day or two. I thought he seemed," faltered Miss Finch in conscience-stricken accents, "kind of thin and pale."

Agatha suppressed a smile. "You're keeping them dangling a rather long time, Fritz. I never suspected you before of being a flirt." Then as Miss Finch groaned aloud, the girl repented of her little witticism and hastened to ask, "Aren't you any nearer to making up your mind?"

"The trouble is, Agatha," sighed Miss Finch, "that there's so many good reasons on both sides, for and against. I've thought and thought till it's seemed as if my head was spinning 'round on my shoulders. You see there was a cousin of my mother's who was a second wife. She married a man named Flagg, and I've heard her tell Ma that

she got so sick of hearing about the way the first Mrs. Flagg did things, that if she'd risen up out of her grave, she'd have given her back her husband as quick as she'd have turned her hand over. She said he was always talking about his first wife's mince meat and her mustard pickles and how saving she was, till it seemed as if there wasn't any use in her trying to do things right."

"Well?" Agatha prompted, more to afford Miss Finch the relief of unburdening her mind than because she failed to see the application of the tragedy of the second Mrs. Flagg.

"Deacon Wiggins has been married three times. It's likely that some one of those three women could do pretty near everything better than I can," explained Miss Finch, with characteristic humility. "If it was hard for Cousin Caroline Flagg to have one wife held up to her for an example day and night, I don't know how I'm going to stand three of them."

Agatha patted the limp hand clutching the damp pocket handkerchief. "I'm sure *I* should find three predecessors a drawback. That's where Mr. Doolittle has the advantage."

"Yes, he seems to have, Agatha. But there's no

denying that a man who's lived fifty years without being married to anybody gets dreadfully set in his ways. My father's sister married a man when he was along about fifty, and she was twenty years younger. He was a nice man, but stubborn. For one thing he always kept a pair of extra boots standing under the bed, with the toes sticking out, so he could change quick if he came in. Aunt Hannah was one of the nervous kind and she had looked under the bed for a burglar all her life. When she'd come into the room and see the toes of those boots, it always gave her a turn, and she'd feel sure she'd found him at last. Anybody'd have supposed she'd get used to it after a time, but she never did. She tried her hardest to get him to keep his boots in the closet, and she'd make shoe-bags for him, all bound around with tape and real pretty-looking, but it wasn't any use. He said he'd always kept his boots under the bed, and he'd feel lost if they was anywhere else. Seems as if when a man lives single long enough, he gets to think there ain't but one way of doing things and that's his."

"Deacon Wiggins should be adaptable, then," hazarded Agatha. "He's accommodated himself to the ways of three women."

"There's another thing," Miss Finch continued, ignoring Agatha's tentative encouragement. "And that's the first wife's relations. I remember Cousin Caroline used to say she didn't mind his folks dropping in, and of course she didn't mind her folks, but when his first wife's folks came to Sunday dinner, or to spend the day, she was on pins and needles. And she said if ever the bread wasn't as light as usual, or the roast got overdone, it would be when some of the first Mrs. Flagg's relations stopped for a meal. She'd been a member of the Methodist church from the time she was thirteen, Cousin Caroline had, and she was president of the Women's Foreign Missionary Society, but I've heard her say with my own ears that she'd rather see the devil coming up the walk any day, than one of the Sawyer tribe—the first Mrs. Flagg was a Sawyer. And she had one set of wife's relations to worry her. I—I—if I took Deacon Wiggins, I'd have three."

"If you married James Doolittle," contributed Agatha cheeringly, "you wouldn't be troubled in that way."

"No, I wouldn't. But I'm not sure that too little company wouldn't be worse than too much. Mr. Doolittle ain't ever been what you'd call a social man,

and except for that sister of his who lives out west, he hasn't any folks to speak of. And as long as I haven't any, I don't see how between us we could scare up enough mourners for a respectable funeral."

"Oh, come, Fritz, you're talking of weddings, not funerals. It certainly is a pity that these lovers of yours have their advantages—or disadvantages—so evenly balanced. It's like a see-saw, first one's down and then the other, and that makes it hard to come to a decision."

Miss Finch took the banter seriously. "Yes, Agatha, it seems a wicked thing, but I almost wish I'd find out something dreadful about one or the other, like drinking or Sabbath-breaking, and then I'd know what to do. But this weighing things and trying to make up my mind is just wearing me out. Agatha, it ain't what I expected. I supposed it would be an awful pleasant feeling to know that two men wanted you, but the way it's turned out, I don't believe I ever was so worried in my life."

"Perhaps proposals are like wisdom teeth, Fritz, and the slower they are coming, the more trouble they make. But don't forget that you aren't under any obligations to take either of these men. We were getting along fine before they thought of

wanting to marry you, and if you say no to both of them, you and I will keep Old Maids' Hall and be happy ever after."

"I don't believe you're likely to remain single," objected Miss Finch with perfect simplicity. "It's a pity that nice Mr. Warren never came again. You could have had that man if you'd tried. Look at the chocolates he sent you, after only seeing you once, and that in your kitchen clothes."

"If my name must be either Kent or Warren, I'll stay an old maid to the end of my days."

"I don't see why you don't like the name Warren, Agatha, and I think Mrs. Ridgeley Warren sounds awfully nice. But you're the one to be pleased. It's a pity Mr. Forbes is so afflicted. If it wasn't for that he'd make a grand husband."

"Mr. Forbes' worst affliction at present," pronounced Agatha tartly, "is being very much in love with an absolutely heartless and generally despicable young woman named Julia."

"My gracious," lamented Miss Finch. "Nice prospect for him, ain't it?"

"Not so bad as you'd think. She's going to marry another man."

"Oh!" Miss Finch's limp hand came suddenly

to life, found Agatha's fingers and squeezed them. "Maybe he'll get over it," she hinted.

"Maybe." Something in Agatha's tone suggested she was smiling.

"And then if he'd get his eyesight back, the way he expects to—"

"Then he'd have to be introduced to me all over again. You know he thinks I'm a kittenish old lady of seventy."

"If he doesn't like you better when he finds you're not quite twenty, he's different from most men, that's all." There was a new authority in Miss Finch's pronouncement. She spoke as one who knew the sex, to whom its little idiosyncrasies were an open book. And hardly less significant than the change in herself was the fact that Agatha accepted her altered attitude without surprise.

At the same time the girl's impulsive kiss on her old friend's tear-stained cheek was irrelevantly tender. "I must go back to bed," said Agatha. "It'll soon be time to get up. And don't worry over those adorers of yours. It'll do them good to be kept waiting. Men—most men—need to have the conceit taken out of them."

Though she paused in the doorway to charge Miss

Finch to go to sleep immediately, she did not act on her own counsel. Instead she ensconsed herself on the broad sill of the east window and swinging her dangling bare feet, watched the face of the sky slowly brighten, flushing pink at last, like the cheek of a girl. Overhead little rosy clouds floated, like cherubs, listening to the chorus of bird song which grew in volume moment by moment.

Another day was beginning, a good day, Agatha was ready to believe. For though between herself and her heart's desire a tortuous deception lay, to be explained and forgiven, the prospect no longer seemed hopeless. It was an eminently satisfactory world, Agatha decided, with Julia out of the running.

CHAPTER XV

UNDERNEATH THE BOUGH

THE kind-hearted Miss Kent had decreed a holiday for Howard. With characteristic thoughtfulness she had volunteered to take Forbes off his hands, and suggested they fill in the time by a long walk with a picnic lunch in some shady place, dinner to be postponed until a convenient hour after their return. Howard showed hilarious approval of the plan, and Forbes aroused himself from his melancholy abstraction sufficiently to agree, whereupon Agatha fell to making sandwiches, giving directions to Phemie as she worked.

Nature in the raw did not appeal to Miss Finch. She hated long walks. She hated sitting on the grass; while sandwiches, without an accompanying cup of tea, were as ashes to her taste. The others accepted her excuses with fortitude, and left her at home to see that Phemie did not set the house afire, and to grope wearily toward a solution of her vexing

problem. Howard, having stuffed his pockets with a generous proportion of the sandwiches, shouldered his fishing rod and departed to make the most of his holiday. And while the fragrant freshness of the night still lingered in the air, Forbes and Agatha set out in the direction of the woods.

The serene confidence of her morning vigil still enfolded Agatha. She walked as if keeping time to music, inaudible to all ears but her own. Forbes had insisted on carrying the basket of lunch which also contained a book or two, in case their mood should take a literary turn. Agatha kept fast hold of his arm, the better to steer his steps, and he thought there was a hint of friendliness in the firm clasp. The lonely and unhappy man felt a disproportionate sense of gratitude.

They walked and rested, strolled on and rested again. Neither was inclined to talk. Forbes had plenty to occupy his thoughts, and Agatha, too, was reflective. She realized that the time was at hand when she must confess to Forbes the deception she had practised on him, or else allow him to go out of her life altogether. Neither alternative was agreeable, but the latter was unthinkable.

A scheme occurred to her so in harmony with her native audacity that she dallied with it lovingly,

before reluctantly renouncing it as impracticable. She could tell Forbes that she expected a visit from her grand-niece, Agatha Kent, and prejudice him in favor of the newcomer by assuring him of the extraordinary likeness existing between the twentieth-century Agatha and her girlhood self. After the new Agatha's arrival, she could leave him more and more to the society of the younger woman, withdrawing by degrees into the background until her sudden demise would hardly shock him, though he would naturally feel more or less responsible for consoling her namesake and heir. Agatha's final rejection of the plan was due less to doubt of her ability to act the dual rôle, or to manage the embarrassing details of her own interment, than to the realization that if her intimacy with Forbes was to continue, it must be established on a foundation of absolute truth. This deception on which she had entered so light-heartedly, had its sole excuse in the impermanence of their relationship. Before their friendship could become real there must be perfect understanding between them.

They ate their sandwiches shortly after noon, washing them down with deliciously cool water from a convenient spring. The day had grown warm and

very still. "It feels as if a thunder-storm might be brewing," Forbes remarked, breaking one of the periods of friendly silence.

"I think not," Agatha answered in a dreamy voice. "Don't you love this stillness here in the shade? It's perfect, perfect!"

> " 'A book of verses underneath the bough,
> A loaf of bread, a jug of wine—and thou,' "

quoted Forbes inevitably. He was laughing but the lines stirred her, and to disguise the fact she spoke nonchalantly.

"There *is* a book of poems in the basket, but I don't care for reading to-day, do you? It's one of the times when you feel everything that has ever been written and more too. You simply want to sit and think how wonderful it is to be alive."

"By jove, it's you that's wonderful," Forbes exclaimed. "That sensitiveness wears off with most people long before they're my age, to say nothing of yours. But you feel the thrill of life and the mystery and the adventure, as if you were a girl."

"Yes," Agatha acquiesced, "I do."

"I'd have known it without your telling me. It's been a continual marvel all through our acquaint-

ance, that ardent freshness of yours. It's confirmed my faith in immortality."

Agatha had no answer ready. He groped for her hand and took possession of it with becoming masterfulness.

"I've got something to say to you, something very important. I've meant to say it for an age, but I've been too much of a coward to risk a no."

Agatha was obliged to remind herself that she was almost seventy years of age. Otherwise she might have suspected she was listening to a proposal.

"Before I can explain my plan, I want to ask you something. Aren't you ever lonely here in winter?"

The question was less formidable than she had anticipated. Her quick assent showed relief.

"And aren't you going to miss me a little when I go back to the city?"

"Of course I shall," she said faintly, and instinctively tried to withdraw her hand. He tightened his hold, laughing.

"Please don't take it away. It does me good, and I'm sure it can't do you any harm. Now you've given me just the encouragement I needed. If you're lonely here, and if you're going to miss me, why shouldn't you and I set up housekeeping together?"

"I—I don't understand." Again Agatha steadied herself with the recollection of her three-score years and seven.

"I'm afraid you've spoiled me," Forbes continued with sudden seriousness. "I've grown shamefully dependent on you. It isn't altogether or chiefly that you've looked after my physical comfort so wonderfully, though, of course, that counts. But you've been so interested in all that concerns me, so sympathetic, such a good pal—" He broke off, apparently at a loss for words. "You're as bracing as an October breeze," he said. "God knows what I should have done without you, this damnable summer."

The thought crossed her mind that this was her opportunity. Now that they were alone, now that he had acknowledged his indebtedness, she could safely throw herself upon his mercy. Her lips parted for her confession, and an overmastering cowardly fear paralyzed the organs of speech. Suppose he refused to forgive her. Then he would go away and she would never see him again. She must make herself still more indispensable. She must foster that feeling of dependence before she risked self-accusation.

"Of course I must be in town next winter," Forbes

went on. "Why shouldn't I take a furnished apartment and have you as a sort of mother confessor? We can get some good servants so you will be relieved of all responsibility as far as the establishment is concerned, and your sole duty will be to keep me content with life. How does that appeal to you?"

Agatha heard herself faltering something about Miss Finch.

"Oh, we'll find a place for Miss Finch," Forbes said tolerantly. "I took it for granted Miss Finch would come along, just as I assumed that your shadow would accompany you."

"It may be that Zaida will be married by fall," exclaimed Agatha, seizing the opportunity to postpone the necessity of answering him. She would not have risked the story on Warren, but she trusted Forbes to understand that even while her voice broke with uncontrollable laughter, she was not holding her old friend up to ridicule. As she described Miss Finch's singular quandary, Forbes joined in her laughter, more spontaneously than for many weeks, though he made no effort to conceal his amazement.

"Miss Finch! I begin to feel that I haven't done justice to the lady's charms. She has impressed me

as colorless, not faded, you know, but colorless from the start."

"It's well we don't all see alike," Agatha said demurely, though a little startled by his perspicacity.

His next remark took her by surprise. "It's a thousand pities you never married."

Her impertinent retort that there was still time for that, was checked before it left her lips, and replaced by the less hazardous rejoinder, "In that case, probably I shouldn't be sitting here with you."

"True. But my good luck has meant loss to so many. You would have been an incomparable mother. It's a shame you didn't have a dozen children. Do you know I've never in my life felt such a sense of being mothered as I have since I came to Oak Knoll. My own mother was an invalid when I first remember her."

A little confused, but gallantly striving to live up to her maternal rôle, Agatha patted his arm with her disengaged hand. He showed his filial appreciation by kissing the other.

"It wasn't my father's fault, anyway, that you didn't fulfil your destiny. He took me into his confidence the last few months of his life, not in any formal way, you understand, just a word dropped

here and there. He was the tenderest of husbands to my mother, but at the last of his life, his thoughts were all with his first love." He turned toward her with a gesture plainly interrogative. "He must have been rather an attractive young fellow."

"He was." Agatha spoke with conviction.

"And still you turned him down. I suppose it would be presumptuous to hazard a guess that there was another man."

"Yes, I think it would be rather presumptuous," Agatha said breathlessly. "Anyway, it's foolish, dragging up old love-affairs. 'Let the dead past bury its dead,' you know, though you modern young folks don't hold Longfellow in such esteem as my generation did."

"I was only thinking that if there was a man who might have married you and didn't, he's probably putting in his time in the next world cursing his luck. But you're not going to be as hard on the son as you were on the father, are you?"

"I—I—do you mean—"

"You're not going to blast all my hopes by saying no. How am I going to get along without you; tell me that?"

"You must give me a little time to think," Agatha protested faintly. She had vowed that morning to

avoid all references in the future to her advanced age, but the habit of acting a part was too strong to be overcome by a single resolution. She heard herself continuing mechanically, "Old people don't like to be hurried into important decisions. Leaving the home of so many years and going away with a young man may seem a very little thing to you, but to me it's a real adventure."

"Take all the time you want for reflection," he conceded generously. "Only understand, you must end by saying yes!"

"You might change your mind and not want me," Agatha said. The playfulness oozed out of her tone as she voiced her haunting dread. "You might find out something about me, some trait you had never suspected. I might be any number of awful things —deceitful, for instance." Again the impulse to confession took her by the throat. Again she fought it off almost with terror. It was too soon. She was not ready. She did not know what to say, and moreover the moment was too sweet to spoil.

Forbes laughed tolerantly. "Oh, I'll take the risk. Shall we shake hands on the bargain?"

He was amused by the fervor of her refusal, but his instinct warned him he was carrying his teasing too far. He had a strong conviction that she would

end by accepting his proposition, but nothing would be gained by hurrying her to a decision. Though in most things she was strangely younger than her years, her age manifested itself in her reluctance to change the established order. He congratulated himself on broaching the subject early enough to give her time for accustoming herself to the idea.

A comfortable silence fell between them. Forbes stretched himself on the pine needles, and presently dropped off to sleep. He had held to her hand throughout their talk with seeming playfulness, though perhaps underneath was the instinct of the blind man to establish a link between himself and his kind, to touch what he can not see. In his sleep he moved nearer the imprisoned hand, and lay with his cheek touching it. And though her arm grew very tired from staying in one position so long, passing through the various stages from prickles to excruciating pain, and finally to a numbness which made her wonder if she could ever use it again, Agatha did not move. Indeed as she sat listening to his quiet breathing, feeling through the torture of her cramped muscles the touch of his cheek against her hand, her only quarrel with the hour was that it could not last.

CHAPTER XVI

MISS FINCH FOLLOWS A CLASSIC EXAMPLE

ZAIDA FINCH was not ill-pleased at the prospect of a day to herself. Agatha's personality was distracting. It was next to impossible to concentrate your thoughts on your own affairs, however urgent the need, when Agatha was darting about like a bright-plumaged bird, saying things that interested you, even though you frequently found them shocking. "She's a dear girl," Miss Finch reflected, "but upsetting; and I need quiet."

She seated herself upon the broad porch, with the inevitable mending, and wearily began weighing the advantages of one suitor against those of his rival. There was the matter of health to be considered, an important factor in reaching a decision. Zaida remembered a spinster of forty married to a man considerably her senior, who had been a bride three weeks to a day when the bridegroom was smitten with paralysis.

"And poor Linda was nothing but a sick-nurse from that on," mused Miss Finch. "He must have lasted a good twenty years. I never was much of a hand in the sick-room. Nursing would wear me out in no time."

But though caution sharpened her natural acuteness, Miss Finch was unable to award to either of the gentlemen who had honored her, any advantage over the other in the matter of health. She could not remember that Deacon Wiggins had ever been ill, though sickness and death had been familiar guests in his household. James Doolittle frequently walked with a limp due to rheumatic trouble, but James came from long-lived stock, and gave a reassuring impression of toughness. As far as human judgment could play the prophet, she would not be called on to act as nurse to either aspirant, at least for a number of years.

Miss Finch's mending suffered. She found it difficult to employ her brain and her fingers in synchronous activities, and as selecting a husband naturally took precedence over stopping the holes in Howard's socks, she sat much of the morning with her hands lying idle in her lap, her countenance expressing a concentration almost tragic. By noon she

was fairly limp from the strain and she went to the kitchen to ask Phemie for a cup of tea.

The sound of wheels recalled her to the porch before her modest luncheon was disposed of. Her first apprehension that either the deacon or James Doolittle was coming to insist on an immediate answer, vanished as she caught sight of two unmistakably feminine figures on the rear seat of the rickety vehicle approaching. But her feeling of reassurance was of brief duration. Almost immediately the conviction seized her that the women were strangers.

Miss Finch stood quaking. Her constitutional shyness had been so cultivated by a lifetime of keeping herself in the background that the prospect of an interview with the unknown women presented itself as an ordeal. It was probable, Miss Finch reflected, that they were city people looking for board. In that case it was only necessary to tell them that they did not wish any additional boarders, and they would have no alternative but to go away. Nevertheless she wished with illogical heartiness that Agatha were at home to assume the responsibility of the interview.

The creaking carryall came to a halt in front of

the house. Miss Finch saw that of the two passengers, one was young and one elderly, while both were smartly dressed and formidable. It was the older woman who addressed her, eying her disapprovingly through her lorgnette, and speaking in a tone of incredulity that somehow was offensive.

"My good woman, kindly tell me whether this is Oak Knoll."

"Yes, it is," said Miss Finch, reduced by the lorgnette to abject helplessness.

The driver growled something from the front seat. Miss Finch understood him to say, "Next time maybe you'll believe me."

"And is Mr. Forbes, Mr. Burton Forbes, spending the summer here?" The incredulity was as marked as before and as disagreeable.

"Yes'm," replied Miss Finch faintly. "He is."

The driver growled again. The substance of his remark, as far as Miss Finch could grasp it in her confusion, seemed to be, "What did I tell you?"

But it mattered little to Miss Finch what the driver had to say. A deplorable certainty absorbed her. The women were preparing to alight. There was a trifling delay, owing to the fact they seemed to expect the driver to assist them, while he assured

them that he did not dare to leave his horses. As the dejected steeds stood with hanging heads, apparently resigned to the prospect of dying in their traces, the indignation of the two passengers was amply justified.

They were out at last, and while the elderly lady haughtily paid the driver, Miss Finch's distended eyes were taking a rapid inventory of the younger. She was extremely handsome, Miss Finch saw, tall and slender and tremendously striking in her black and white costume. She stood looking about her with an evident disdain which the little spinster might have resented, had she not been chilled by an indefinable fear.

When the beautiful stranger spoke, her remark was a complete surprise. "Miss Kent, I suppose."

Zaida Finch became aware of an inexplicable hostility in the other's manner, of an arrogance that bordered on insolence. She found she was being scrutinized contemptuously. The little drab nonentity felt in her veins an unprecedented stirring of resentment.

"No, I'm not," she said with a flatness that seemed deliberately contradictive. "I'm Miss Finch."

"Be so kind as to call Miss Kent."

"She's out, I'm sorry to say," replied Miss Finch, and her regret was heartfelt. If only Agatha were on hand to give back this presumptuous girl stare for stare, to inquire her errand, in the chilling tone of which Agatha knew the secret, and finally to send her about her business.

"Call Mr. Forbes, then."

"Mr. Forbes is out, too," Miss Finch explained, and a little chill ran down her spine. She had forgotten how imperative it was that Agatha should not encounter any of Forbes' friends. If their unwelcome guests lingered, it would be necessary for Agatha to become Hephzibah again with all the inconveniences attendant on that incarnation. "I've got to get rid of 'em somehow," thought Miss Kent distractedly.

But apparently for the younger of the two strangers, Miss Finch had ceased to exist. She turned to her companion impatiently. "It's dreadfully boring, Aunt Estelle, but Burton is out at present. We'll have to sit on the porch and wait. Fortunately it is shady."

"Yes, it seems to be *shady*," admitted Aunt Estelle, with an emphasis indicating that as far as the

porch was concerned, she could make no further concessions. She climbed the steps looking about her with multiplying evidences of disquiet. "Ask her when Burton will be back," she enjoined, exactly as if Miss Finch had spoken a foreign tongue, and could be addressed only through an interpreter.

Miss Finch did not wait to have the inquiry translated. "I don't know *when* he'll be back," she said quickly. "Probably he'll be gone all day."

"He'll return for luncheon, I suppose," said Aunt Estelle, grudgingly acknowledging Miss Finch's ability to speak English, but apparently liking her no better on that account.

"No, he won't," declared Miss Finch, with unaccustomed positiveness. "They took sandwiches."

The two women exchanged glances. "Who is with Mr. Forbes?" asked the younger. Her manner implied her right to know.

"Ag—well, Miss Kent went with him." And to herself Miss Finch added wildly, "I can't have a lie on my conscience, even for Agatha."

"Who else was in the party, please?" The young woman in black and white had become a judge, and Miss Finch, the prisoner at the bar.

"There wasn't anybody else," gasped Miss Finch, with every indication of uttering a deliberate and premeditated falsehood.

"Where were they going?"

"I don't know exactly. They were going for a picnic somewhere, but I didn't hear 'em say where. I don't know as they knew themselves."

The judicial sternness became more marked as the prisoner's embarrassment increased. "You mean that Mr. Forbes and Miss Kent have gone off for the day with—sandwiches?" Something in her inflection made the mention of sandwiches the crowning insult to her intelligence.

"Yes," faltered Miss Finch guiltily. "They often take long walks, and carry a picnic lunch."

The older lady spoke with asperity. "It's a preposterous situation. I'm sorry to remind you, Julia, that I said at the start it would be better to telegraph."

Miss Finch started violently. She recalled Agatha's confidential assurance that Forbes was in love with a despicable young woman named Julia, but that the aforesaid Julia was to marry another man. Yet here she was, undeniably handsome, terrifyingly elegant, and worst of all, with no apparent

doubt as to her right to be demanding the immediate producing of Mr. Forbes.

The two women had seated themselves, Aunt Estelle ostentatiously dusting the rocker she trusted with her ample person. Miss Finch proffered a belated and reluctant hospitality.

"If you're thinking of sitting here long, I'll see about getting you something to eat."

Julia brushed the offer aside without thanks. "We shall wait for Mr. Forbes."

"It is really absurd, you know," Aunt Estelle contributed, "for us to sit waiting indefinitely. Burton must be somewhere about. A blind man and an old woman can not possibly walk very far. Why are they not sent for?"

As her inquiry was addressed to Julia, Julia passed it on to Miss Finch, her extremely frigid tone indicating that Miss Finch should have thought of that herself.

"There's nobody to send except the hired girl," Miss Finch explained despairingly. "And she never was known to find anything, even if it was right under her nose. If only Howard—"

Miss Finch checked herself abruptly. A thought had flashed across her mind so dazzling in its bril-

liancy she could hardly believe herself capable of originating it. Indeed, the probability is that she had not done so, but that some extravagant fancy of Agatha's, falling like seed into her subconsciousness, had lain there dormant till the emergency brought it to swift germination. Zaida Finch had never heard of Victor Hugo's saintly nun, crowning a lifetime of sanctity by a devout and holy lie, but unconsciously she was inspired to emulate her example.

With Miss Finch veracity was almost a mania. She was one of the tiresome people who are continually suspecting themselves of exaggeration or of misrepresentation of something absolutely without importance, and then bore their associates by insisting on their attention while they painstakingly correct their statements. Yet now she forgot her habitual dread of falsehood. If a lie were necessary to save Agatha, lie she must.

She resumed her interrupted sentence, pale but resolute. "If only Howard was well, he could look for 'em. He could find 'em if anybody could. But it'll be a good while before he does much running around, I guess."

The two visitors regarded her stonily. In her

simplicity she had assumed their cooperation to the extent of a question or two. They would surely ask her who Howard was, or why he was incapacitated. But apparently these matters did not interest them in the slightest degree. It was necessary for Miss Finch to continue her career of mendacity unaided by so much as the lifting of an interrogative eyebrow.

Miss Finch rose to the occasion. "He's sick, you know," she confided to the two pairs of indifferent ears. "High fever, and considerable of a rash—if you'd call it a rash."

Aunt Estelle showed a slight uneasiness. "You've consulted a physician, I suppose."

"We're trying a kind of mental cure first," replied Miss Finch as glibly as if she had practised perjury from her childhood. "And then if that don't work, Ag—Miss Kent is going to call in the doctor. But she don't like to do it till she has to, for it would be awful inconvenient to be quarantined."

"Quarantined," exclaimed Aunt Estelle with fresh evidences of perturbation. "Have you any reason to think that it may be contagious?"

"Most of these rashy diseases are," Miss Finch replied. And though there was no malice in her

composition, she was conscious of relishing Aunt Estelle's air of agitation. "I'm hoping it's nothing worse than scarlet fever, though there's been a good many cases of smallpox around here lately. And I don't know that Howard's ever been vaccinated."

Aunt Estelle rose from her chair with a little cry. In her palpitating pallor she reminded Miss Finch irresistibly of blanc-mange.

"Smallpox, Julia," she exclaimed. "Do you hear what the woman says—smallpox! Even if we escape with our lives, one's complexion—oh, my God! Why did I ever listen to this mad idea of yours!"

Julia's composure was in refreshing contrast to her aunt's excitement. She rose, it is true, but only to advance to the older woman's side and whisper in her ear. And having whispered, she calmly resumed her seat, and looked away toward the hills, apparently intensely interested in the scenery.

Aunt Estelle stood irresolute. "Do you really think so?"

"I'm absolutely sure of it," said Julia.

"I think I noticed a little wildness in the eye myself," Aunt Estelle conceded, with a return of her earlier conviction of Miss Finch's inability to understand English.

"Unmistakable," opined Julia.

Miss Finch looked blankly from one to the other and hope was at low ebb. They were going to stay. She had thrilled with childlike pride at the discovery of her own inventiveness, culpable though it might be. Complacency had whispered that Agatha herself could not have done better. And now she realized that her effort had failed. She had sacrificed her conscience to friendship, and the sacrifice had been in vain. Though not so quick-witted as many another, she had no difficulty in recognizing the conclusion these strangers had reached. To herself she said, "They think I'm crazy."

Miss Finch was not at the end of her resources. Her lapse from the path of rectitude had proved strangely stimulating to the imagination. She meant to get rid of these women before Agatha returned. Agatha would be equal to the emergency provided she were not taken by surprise. If Julia and her aunt were not afraid of smallpox, it was possible that they might be afraid of a crazy woman who showed signs of becoming violent.

"G-r-r-r-r—" said Miss Finch menacingly. Aunt Estelle jumped and took another chair. For the first time in her life, Miss Finch felt herself at no

disadvantage because of her insignificant proportions. "G-r-r-r-r-r—" she said again.

"Julia," exclaimed Aunt Estelle nervously, "do you really think it's safe—"

The intrepidity of the modern young woman passes comprehension. "Harmless, I imagine," Julia said with nonchalance. "Otherwise Burton would hardly have remained."

"Why he should have remained in this place under any circumstances," declared Aunt Estelle, "passes my comprehension."

"There must be some reason we know nothing about. Burton will explain." Something in Julia's tone implied that Forbes would not find explanations altogether easy. She added with evident relief, "Here he comes now."

"Thank heaven!" cried Aunt Estelle piously.

Miss Finch looked wildly in the direction of Julia's steadfast gaze. All was over. Arm in arm across the grass, so absorbed in each other that the girl was as blind as the man to the audience on the porch, came Agatha and Forbes.

CHAPTER XVII

THE DAY OF JUDGMENT

FORBES woke refreshed from his sylvan nap, and sat for a little discoursing on the invigorating effect of contact with mother earth, while Agatha, by drastic massage, restored the circulation to her temporarily paralyzed arm. The sun had dipped but little toward the western horizon when they turned their faces homeward, and they walked slowly. Agatha exulted in heat. A temperature of ninety stimulated her both physically and mentally. But Forbes found the warmth of the day relaxing, and she set the pace with that fact in mind.

Toward the last of their long leisurely walk, Forbes brought up the subject he had introduced earlier in the day. Though he made no effort to hurry her to a decision, he sketched entertainingly some of the diversions she might anticipate, if she accepted his invitation for the winter. The program was planned with due regard for the infirmities of age, but Agatha listened raptly.

They were but a few rods from their destination, Forbes talking earnestly, and Agatha hanging on his words, when some mysterious sixth sense warned her of danger. She looked ahead and instantly halted. Forbes felt her figure stiffen against his arm, and instinct told him she was frightened. "What is the matter?" he cried, sickening with a new realization of his helplessness.

Agatha did not answer, but as she stared ahead she understood that doomsday had arrived unheralded. A young woman was tripping toward them, a handsome young woman, who even without beauty would have attracted all eyes by the distinction of her dress and bearing. It could be no other than Julia. The ample lady in the background, following with a haste that empurpled her complexion, that she might not be left tête-à-tête with a maniac, failed to attract Agatha's attention. Julia's graceful figure dominated the landscape.

"What *is* the matter?" Forbes again demanded. He laid his hand reassuringly over the fingers trembling upon his arm. And at that moment a voice subtly reproachful, suggestively tender, spoke his name. "Burton!"

"Julia!" Forbes shouted. His dear old friend,

Miss Kent, and her mysterious perturbation, were instantly forgotten. He started forward, remembered that he was blind, stood irresolute, his hands outstretched. "Julia!" he cried again, this time with entreaty as well as rapture.

Agatha was ready to believe that then and there she had amply atoned for her sins, past and present. Even the certainty that the hour of her humiliation was at hand could not hurt worse than the joy ringing through his voice as he spoke another woman's name. She wondered dully at her own folly. She had been warned and had not heeded. She had known all the time of his love for Julia, and yet had foolishly assumed that since Julia's selfish decision had put her out of his reach, he would turn to her for consolation. Her pride had not rebelled over taking what Julia had thrown away. Indeed she had thought very little about herself. Her one desire was to be light to his blind eyes, balm to his wounded heart. But her castle of dreams was in ruins, as soon as he spoke the name she had hated from the first day she had heard it on his lips.

Julia approached him as swiftly as was consistent with grace, a rather insolent triumph in the glance she shot over his shoulder toward the pale girl stand-

ing in the background. "Yes, Burton," she said gently, "it is Julia," and extended both hands.

He caught them ardently and held them fast, his eager face questioning her dumbly, though he only said, "What a wonderful surprise! How good of you, how very good of you!"

"My aunt, Mrs. Knox, is with me, Burton," continued Julia, the pensiveness of her tone flatly contradicted by her air of elation. "I think you have met Mr. Forbes, Aunt Estelle."

Aunt Estelle, still panting, brought herself into hand-shaking distance and this formality helped to recall Forbes to the realization that there were other people in the world besides Julia and himself. He turned toward Agatha.

"This is a pleasure I have been promising myself," he said. "Julia, I want you to know my dear friend, Miss Kent. Miss Kent, let me present Mrs. Knox and Miss Studley."

The blankness of the silence that ensued was as definite as a blow. Forbes stood awaiting the conventional formula, but his quick ear could detect only the sound of hurried breathing. Again he turned toward Agatha, but for the first time she failed him.

"Miss Kent is still here, is she not?" queried Forbes. He remembered his ideas had been chaotic after discovering Julia's presence. His late companion might easily have withdrawn without attracting his attention.

For so simple a question, the effect was startling. "Burton," Julia cried, her voice sharp to the point of shrillness, "what are you talking about?"

Aunt Estelle caught her sleeve. "Can't you understand, Julia?" she hissed. "This place is a private asylum. That crazy old creature on the porch, and now him. It's perfectly plain. Let us go away at once."

Forbes caught most of this sibilant outburst. He turned white with anger. "Miss Kent?" he pleaded, and Agatha pulled herself together. Her voice was steady if slightly unnatural, as she answered, "Yes, I am here."

Forbes tried to laugh. The consciousness of being enveloped in baffling mystery made his blindness doubly intolerable. There was a bewilderment in his voice that wrung Agatha's heart.

"This is what I have been hoping for all summer. You know how often I've wished you and Miss Studley might know each other."

"Burton," Julia screamed, "who and what is this person?"

The contempt in her tone, even more than her disdainful phrasing, brought the blood racing to his forehead. "Julia!" He seemed to defy her to go on. "If you have read my letters at all," he said in a vibrant voice, "you know both who Miss Kent is and how much I am in her debt."

"Miss Kent! Your father's friend!"

"And mine as well, Julia." There was no ecstatic tenderness now in his use of her name, but indignant sternness.

"Burton, either you are insane or the woman is an impostor. She is not old. She is young, hardly more than a girl."

Forbes attempted to reply, but for a moment no words came. He put his hand to his forehead with a confused gesture. "I have been off in the woods with Miss Kent all day," he stammered. "I supposed—I had not noticed—" Again he turned in Agatha's direction. "Who are you, please?"

There was no trace of emotion in her composed answer. "I am Agatha Kent."

"Do you dare to say," shrieked Julia, "that you were the friend of Mr. Forbes' father?"

"I never saw Mr. Forbes' father."

Forbes took a step ahead, then halted, and stood with his feet a little apart, like one who balances himself on the deck of a heaving ship in a high sea. "But where," he stammered, "where is the other Miss Kent?"

"There is no other. My Great-aunt Agatha, for whom I was named, died twelve years ago."

There was a momentary palpitating silence which Julia was the first to break.

"And you mean," she arraigned her, "that all this summer you have been a deliberate impostor, palming yourself off on Mr. Forbes as an old woman, allowing him to think—oh, it's too shameful. I can't believe any girl would be so base."

"It is quite true, nevertheless," Agatha assured her gently. Her steady eyes met Julia's, and even that intrepid young woman drew back a step. Her momentary shrinking was not unreasonable for could concentrated hate smite like a lightning bolt, her life would have been measured by seconds.

Instinct taught Julia how to repay that level look by the deadliest hurt. She turned on Forbes furiously. "Do you mean to tell me that you have been the victim of a hoax all summer, that this girl has

passed herself off on you for an old woman? But, no, it isn't possible. You've contrived this outrageous story between you to cover up something disgraceful. You couldn't have been such a dupe as you pretend. It's incredible!"

Forbes' color came and went during this attack. "It seems incredible," he owned when she gave him opportunity. "I don't blame you for questioning the truth of such a story. I can only remind you that it is easy to deceive a blind man."

Something in Agatha's stony whiteness convinced Julia that she had made no mistake in her choice of retribution. She gave the screws another turn.

"You mean for me to believe, Burton, that you've been only the gullible victim of a swindle, that this impostor has tricked you successfully all these months?"

There was a rather long silence. "Yes," said Forbes tonelessly, "that is what I mean."

Julia's first sense of being at a disadvantage had passed. She was thoroughly enjoying herself.

"I begin to understand your strange letter," she said, addressing Agatha. "Your letter of congratulation, you know. I suppose you are the young woman to whom you referred, the one with whom

Mr. Forbes had spent so much time, you no doubt remember."

There was such malicious satisfaction in her tone that Forbes turned as if to interfere. Then his uplifted arm dropped rather heavily to his side.

"You'll laugh when I tell you, Burton," exclaimed Julia, setting him the example by laughing herself, most unpleasantly. "But she insinuated in this letter that you might marry her. That is at the bottom of this outrageous plot. She actually thought she could compromise you in some dreadful way and force you to marry her. Shocking as it is, one can't help being amused."

Forbes' only answer was again to lift his hand to his head. It was Agatha who spoke. Unmasked adventuress as she was, her dignity was in rather agreeable contrast to Julia's vindictive shrillness.

"It is hardly necessary to trouble Mr. Forbes with any further details," she said, "since, thanks to you, my plot against his peace has been exposed. I suppose you will want to take him away as soon as possible."

"Oh, at once." Julia showed signs of becoming hysterical. "The very first train. I feel as if I couldn't breathe in this atmosphere of deceit."

"I'm afraid there is no train before five o'clock, but I'll have the carriage ready in plenty of time. And now, if you will excuse me, I shall see about getting you some luncheon."

"Luncheon! Good heavens, I couldn't eat a mouthful. It would choke me."

Mrs. Knox seconded her niece admirably. "It would not be safe, Julia. A person capable of all this would not hesitate to poison our food."

Agatha accepted this tribute without comment. "Will you pack Mr. Forbes' things yourself?" she said, addressing Julia.

Again Mrs. Knox intervened. "Julia, I forbid you to go into that house, with this girl, and that dreadful, crazy creature—"

Forbes interrupted with signs of irritation. "You said that once before. There is no insane woman here."

"I am afraid you are not a very good judge of what *is* or is *not* here, Mr. Forbes," replied Aunt Estelle, scoring again. "We had a most unpleasant encounter with a woman clearly insane. She positively gibbered."

"Yes, Burton," Julia cried with shrewish enjoyment, "you have been made a laughing-stock all

summer, poor dear. You've kept writing about this fine old place. I wish you could see it. It's simply in the last stages of dilapidation."

"It's ready to fall to pieces," corroborated Aunt Estelle. "I didn't venture inside, but the glimpses of the interior I got from the window showed that everything was fairly moth-eaten."

"Yes," Agatha admitted quietly. "We are very poor, so poor that a blind boarder seemed providential. Won't you sit on the porch till the carriage is ready?" she added politely. "I'm sure Mr. Forbes is tired after his long walk."

"Oh, please," protested Julia, her self-control shaken by the other's calm, "please drop this pretext of being so interested in Mr. Forbes' welfare. After the fraud you have practised on him all summer you can hardly expect him to believe anything you say."

"Oh, no," said Agatha. "I don't expect that for a moment. And now if you're sure you won't eat a little luncheon, I'll bid you all good afternoon." She went across the grass to the house, carrying herself with her chin high, moving deliberately. No one could have guessed the fact of which she was so certain, that during the encounter she had ceased to be a girl, that she had leaped without any intervening

stages of maturity and middle life, straight to old age, that dreadful old age, beyond hope or joy, the age that is death in life. Agatha remembered wonderingly that once the mere flicker of sunshine through leaves, the mere fragrance of a flower, had a magic to quicken her pulses.

A little after three the carryall appeared. Howard was driving, and Forbes' suit-case and other impedimenta lay on the seat beside him. As he helped his passengers in, he explained that the trunk would be sent by express next day. This announcement was received in frigid silence whereupon Howard, too, became sulkily silent and used the whip on the fat bays with such effect that they covered the five miles between Oak Knoll and the village station at an unprecedented rate of speed.

Forbes thawed a little when Howard helped him to alight, and stood for a moment beside him. "Good-by, Mr. Forbes," the boy said huskily. "I'm awfully sorry you're going."

He put out his hand and after an instant's hesitation Forbes gripped it. He had grown fond of the boy. "Oh, Howard," he said, his voice betraying his hurt, "I wouldn't have believed it of you."

He heard Howard gulp and then burst out sob-

bing. Fortunately for the boy's pride, the hour was early and the station platform lacked its customary contingent of loafers.

"We didn't mean anything, Mr. Forbes," Howard choked. "Aggie wanted to take boarders, so she could send me to school, but when they saw how old and shabby the house was, they wouldn't come."

"Is she your sister?"

"Kind of one. Her father married my mother. She's better than a thousand real sisters."

"Burton," said Julia's voice beside them, "I wouldn't encourage the boy by listening to him. Probably that young woman has coached him in a new series of lies."

"Aggie never tells lies," Howard challenged her hotly. "This was like a charade or something. Mr. Forbes thought she was old and so she pretended to be. We had lots of fun and it didn't do anybody any harm." He appealed to Forbes. "She took good care of you anyway, didn't she, Mr. Forbes?"

"Really, Burton," expostulated Julia, "I can not allow this to go on. These people evidently regard you as fair game. It's dreadful that your blindness should put you so at the mercy of the unscrupulous,

but I shall see that you are not imposed on while I am with you. Send this boy away."

"He doesn't need to send me away," Howard exploded indignantly. "I'm going." He seized Forbes' hand again. "Good-by, Mr. Forbes. Come and see us some time."

Julia gasped. "Did any one ever imagine such impertinence!" she asked of high heaven. "Such people seem to be without natural shame. I suppose they are so accustomed to being found out in falsehood and fraud that they take it as a matter of course. In the interest of justice there should be some way of punishing them. Couldn't they be prosecuted, Burton, for obtaining money under false pretenses?"

Forbes made no reply. Apparently he did not share Julia's lofty enthusiasm for abstract justice. His air of bewildered dejection suggested a lost child, rather than a man rescued from a false and intolerable position by the lady of his heart.

CHAPTER XVIII

WARREN GETS A TIP

RIDGELEY WARREN had been to the station to bid a friend *bon voyage.* He presented himself armed with a box of chocolates, the latest novel and three brand-new witticisms culled from a roof-garden program the previous evening. The pretty girl had accepted his offerings with marked graciousness and had laughed convulsively at each of the jokes, thereby intensifying Warren's habitual sense of being on good terms with himself and all the world. His spirits unclouded by the pang of parting, he strolled toward the exit, trying to decide where to dine, when his own name reached his ears coupled with a fervent ejaculation, "Mr. Warren! Thank heaven!"

Warren spun on his heel to encounter Julia advancing with extended hand. Julia was not one of Warren's favorites, but her pleasure at the sight of him was contagious. "Gosh!" he exclaimed agreeably, "this *is* luck."

It was while shaking hands with Julia that Warren became aware of Mrs. Knox's imposing figure in the background. And scarcely had he lifted his hat in recognition of her presence, when his eye fell on Forbes, a pale and woebegone object, committed to the clumsy guardianship of a station porter.

Warren turned on Julia blithely. "Don't tell me you've sprung a surprise on us. Don't say that I should have come with my pockets full of rice."

"Oh, Mr. Warren, be serious, please." There was gentle reproach in Julia's uplifted eyes. "It seems really providential meeting you here. Now you can take charge of Burton till he finds some suitable person to look after him."

"What's become of the nice little chap who has been on the job all summer?"

"Oh, Mr. Warren!" Julia's gesture indicated the futility of attempting immediate explanations. "It's a long, a dreadful story, and it will take time to make you understand."

"Hm! I'm not usually considered so dense."

"But this isn't like anything else. It's incredible. I can hardly believe it myself. Let's go to some quiet place where we can have dinner and talk things over."

"Yes, for heaven's sake, let us have dinner," snapped Mrs. Knox. An unusually early hour of rising, together with a midday fast, had reduced her to an unwonted state of nervous irritability. Forbes, too, seemed wrapped in impenetrable gloom. It was not a cheerful party.

Warren's curiosity was aroused. He found a taxi, bundled the dejected trio inside and gave the driver directions. He was rather shocked to see how ill Forbes looked on nearer view, but he concealed that emotion under his usual cloak of levity, and told humorous stories all the way to their destination, covering the lack of responsiveness on the part of his audience by roars of appreciative laughter.

The staid hotel which Warren had selected, though yielding to modern demands sufficiently to institute a roof dining-room, discouraged such innovations as would be likely to attract the light-minded, and Warren's party had no difficulty in securing a table. Warren assumed the prerogative of host and ordered with a lavishness productive of a marked unbending on the part of Mrs. Knox. Julia, too, was hungry enough to look forward to a good dinner with unwonted anticipation, and she smiled

on him appreciatively. Only Forbes remained moodily aloof.

It was over the soup that Warren said cheerily, "Well, now, what's it all about?" He was beginning to realize that something unusual must have occurred to bring Julia and her aunt to town in August, as well as to account for Forbes' strange, dispirited silence.

Mrs. Knox immediately protested. "Oh, Mr. Warren, don't spoil a good meal by bringing up that abominable affair."

"Oh, yes, let it wait, please, Mr. Warren," sighed Julia. "Actually when one realizes what wickedness there is in the world—deceit and imposture and things of that sort—it seems fairly heartless to enjoy one's self."

"Then we'll wait for explanations till dinner is over," Warren conceded, with undiminished buoyancy. But although he made himself entertaining in his usual fashion, his mind was busy with the problem Julia had suggested. Who was the girl hitting, with her talk of deceit and imposture? She could not refer to Miss Kent, naturally, and Howard was equally out of the question. Could it be that Hephzibah's existence had come to her atten-

tion? Was it possible that Forbes had been playing a lone hand and had thereby become involved in an entanglement from which his betrothed had magnanimously rescued him. The unrelieved melancholy of Forbes' face and manner rendered this explanation entirely plausible.

When the coffee was brought on and the men lighted cigarettes, Warren felt, not unnaturally, that his hungry curiosity had a right to satisfaction. "Well, I'm as ready to be shocked as I ever shall be," he said. "Let's hear what has happened. Don't tell me that the staid Miss Kent was on the point of eloping with old Forbes."

To Warren's surprise, this apparently innocent witticism caused Forbes to flush darkly. He noticed, too, that Julia's expression lost something of its pensive sweetness, but even then he was unprepared for the acidity of the tone with which she answered him.

"There is no Miss Kent."

"Eh?" Warren looked rather stupid.

"Strictly speaking," admitted Julia, "there is a person who calls herself by that name. But the nice old lady who was Burton's father's friend has been dead a dozen years."

Warren knocked the ashes from his cigarette with painstaking deliberation. "Must be a rather lively old ghost," he commented, striving to live up to his principle of never showing surprise, "according to all Forbes tells."

"Oh, poor Burton," Julia cried, with a glance of angelic commiseration in the direction of her grimly silent lover. "Wouldn't you have thought that Burton's misfortune would have appealed to the better instincts of the most depraved? But instead, they take advantage of his blindness to trick him in the most infamous fashion. The person who calls herself Agatha Kent—I suppose it really is her name, though any one so absolutely deceitful is as likely to lie about one thing as another—"

"Well?" trumpeted Warren, his strained patience showing itself in the unnecessary loudness of his challenge.

"Do hush, Mr. Warren, everybody's looking at us. This Kent woman isn't a nice motherly person. She isn't old at all, not a bit older than I am."

Warren sucked at his cigarette for a moment and blew the smoke through his nose. He needed a little time in order to preserve the imperturbable demeanor on which he prided himself. He looked at

Julia to be sure she was in earnest, looked at Forbes to see if he were not going to deny this incredible story, and then expressed his feelings by a low whistle.

"Not a nice motherly person," he repeated inanely. "About as old as you are."

"She may even be a little younger," Julia admitted generously.

Warren's air of incredulity deepened. He threw the uncommunicative Forbes a challenging glance.

"Do you mean that Forbes has been spending all his time with her for the past three months and never suspected that she wasn't an old woman?"

"So he claims." Julia's inflection was decidedly tart.

Forbes made one of his rare contributions to the conversation. "I wouldn't have believed such a thing possible myself, but blindness makes one an easy victim."

"Poor Burton!" murmured Julia, melting at once. "To think that any girl should have the heart to take such advantage of another's misfortune."

"But I can't see what she was getting at," Warren demurred. "I've heard that occasionally ladies represent themselves as younger than they really are,

and the reason for that seems plain enough. But why the devil should a young girl want to make herself out an old maid of seventy."

"Purely mercenary at the start," Julia opined. "As I understand it, Burton saw her advertisement for a boarder, and wrote her, supposing she was his father's old friend. And she decided to pass herself off as her great-aunt so as to get as much out of Burton as she could."

"That young woman must have plenty of nerve. It's plain she needed the money, as far as that goes. Place is terribly run-down."

"Oh, shockingly," Mrs. Knox corroborated him, in her deepest tones. "All the furniture I could see through the windows seemed mere wrecks."

"On its last legs," Warren agreed. He waited for a moment and then asked casually, "Well, what's the fuss about? What harm did it do?"

The two women uttered a simultaneous ejaculation of horror. "A piece of barefaced fraud," cried Mrs. Knox.

"She has been getting money under false pretenses," flared Julia. "I believe she can be arrested like any other swindler, and punished."

Warren shrugged his shoulders. "I can't see where the harm comes in," he persisted stubbornly. "She made Forbes comfortable all summer, so comfortable that now he looks like a baby that's being weaned. She took his money, but judging from the meals I ate there, she gave him his money's worth. If she'd been an old party, passing herself off as a youthful beauty, Forbes would have a right to kick. But under the circumstances is seems to me you're making a mountain out of a mole-hill."

Warren's amiable defense of the guilty was not well received. Aunt Estelle regarded him with open hostility, and Julia seemed pained by his moral obtuseness. A flicker of interest lighted Forbes' impassive face and suggested to Warren that his line of argument appealed more strongly to his masculine listener than to the women. Although he held no brief for Agatha Kent, he pressed his advantage.

"We don't know, any of us, what we might do if we were up against it. I've often thought I would commit highway robbery if I were hungry enough. I'll say this for the girl, anyway: She must be a peach of an actress. If she could knock around with a man all summer, walk with him and talk with

him and pet him a little, when he was down in the mouth, and yet never let him suspect that she wasn't old enough to be his grandmother—"

"Really, Mr. Warren," Julia said with asperity, "I can't see any point in continuing this conversation. I had hoped you might be able to make some helpful suggestions regarding Burton, for of course I understand that you can't be burdened with him for more than a few days. But if you are going to spend the evening defending that brazen, red-haired—"

"What!" roared Warren. This time he *had* done it. The head waiter looked in his direction apprehensively.

Aunt Estelle took the protest from Julia's lips. "Pardon me, Mr. Warren, but I must remind you that my niece and I dislike to be made conspicuous by such demonstrations."

Warren ignored the reproof. "What did you call her?" he demanded of Julia, whose only answer was an offended stare.

"Did you say she was red-haired?"

"I—I did. Though why you should attach any importance to anything so trivial, I confess I don't understand."

Warren did not attempt to enlighten her. He indicated to the waiter that he was ready for his check and his manner was offensively jubilant. "I'm afraid," he said genially, "that you'll have to make some plan for disposing of old Forbes besides committing him to my tender mercies. I've just remembered that I'm going out of town in the morning, early train."

Julia looked startled. "But what is Burton to do, then?"

"Just what he would have done if you hadn't run across me. Though if you'd like my candid advice—"

"Yes, please," said Julia, and tried to look winning. It did not suit her that Warren should slip away in this cavalier fashion, leaving her with a blind man on her hands. She had important plans for the remainder of the week. Twenty-four hours was all she could possibly spare for Forbes.

"Then I advise you to marry him offhand. You have taken him away from one young woman who was devoting herself to making him comfortable. I should say that the least you could do was to follow her example."

Julia's gasp of rage made Warren think of a cat

whose tail has been trodden on. From across the table Forbes promptly requested him to mind his own business.

"Just a bit of good advice, old man," Warren soothed him. "Take it or leave it, as you please. Anything more I can do for you people before I go?"

A frigid silence indicated that any service he could offer would be unwelcome, whereupon Warren, having tipped the waiter with a liberality indicative of a jocund spirit, took his smiling departure, leaving dejection behind him.

After a talk with the night clerk, it was arranged that Forbes should remain at the hotel, an adaptable bell-boy agreeing to act as his valet in the morning. Before Mrs. Knox and Julia took refuge in another hostelry, the lovers had a moment to themselves.

Julia was in an unpleasant mood. The emphasis Warren had laid on Miss Kent's histrionic powers had awakened her ready suspicion. As she found herself alone for a moment with her lover, his look of weary dejection aroused her resentment.

"It's most extraordinary, Burton," she complained, "that you should never have suspected her

of being younger than she pretended. I could see that Mr. Warren didn't believe it for a minute."

Forbes replied with perfect conviction that Warren was an ass.

"I should have thought that if you didn't find it out when you were holding her hands, you would have realized it the moment you took her in your arms."

"Damnation!" Forbes was goaded beyond endurance. "I never took her in my arms."

"She said you did," insisted Julia, eying him suspiciously. "In that preposterous letter she wrote me, you know. She said you often held her hands and patted them and that sort of thing."

"I did, I admit it. I supposed her a contemporary of my father's, you remember."

"And she said that once, under rather unusual circumstances, you took her in your arms."

"An absolute lie!" blazed Forbes. "But of course if you are going to doubt my word, Julia—"

Julia said no, that she did not doubt him. She added that when a person had lived a lie for months, one more little falsehood would not mean much. Then she gave him her hand to kiss, and was an-

noyed when he only pressed it and said good night. She had to remind herself that though there was no one near to witness the act of devotion, Burton could not know that he was unobserved, and his undemonstrative demeanor was undoubtedly due to his unwillingness to compromise her.

It was while the adaptable bell-boy was conducting his charge to his room, that enlightenment came. Forbes gave a convulsive start. "Damnation!" he exclaimed, for the second time in fifteen minutes.

"Yes, sir, our floor, sir!" The bell-boy eyed him expectantly. He had an adventurous spirit, though condemned to carry suit-cases and bring ice-water on request. It looked as if there might be something doing with a gentleman who jumped so high and swore so roundly in a public elevator.

Forbes had only realized that the letter Julia had quoted had contained no falsehood. He understood Warren's excitement over the discovery that Agatha Kent was red-haired. Agatha and Hephzibah were one and the same.

The circumstances which led to his taking her in his arms were unusual, indeed. In the close corridors of the city hotel he seemed to smell again the scent of sun-kissed fields. As the bell-boy gripped

his arm, he felt against his heart the pressure of that lithe young body, shaken by sobs. His cheek had brushed another, smooth and fragrant. His pulses had answered the indefinable challenge of youth and beauty. They thrilled again at the mere memory.

Forbes did not fall asleep till nearly morning. He lay awake, trying to decide how far the situation was altered by the fact that Agatha Kent had saved his life.

CHAPTER XIX

THE WORM TURNS

IN THE hour or two of troubled sleep closing his wakeful night, Forbes dreamed vividly and woke with Agatha's voice echoing in his ears. He started up, his lips parted to speak her name, then dropped back upon his pillows with a sense of desolate loss that tried his powers of self-control.

So faithfully had his memory reproduced every intonation of the familiar voice that it had seemed to bring the living woman to his side. He recognized the maternal note which had appealed to him the more because of his unmothered boyhood, the undertone of indulgent humor which was characteristic of the friend on whom he had learned to lean. Only there was no such friend. Her place had been taken by a stranger, capable of bewildering changes of identity, Miss Kent, Hephzibah, and now this newcomer, Agatha, self-confessed impostress who could, even when unmasked and flouted, pre-

serve the dignity which is the heritage of race. He found himself thrilled by an inexplicable pride as he remembered the even voice with which she had answered Julia's shrillness.

The adaptable bell-boy presented himself in due time and awkwardly assisted him with his dressing. After visiting the barber, he was conducted to the hotel dining-room, and here the realization was brought home to him that for many a month Agatha's tact had stood between him and embarrassment. She had prepared his food so that he ate without any especial sense of being at a disadvantage. His fork was always at hand when he wanted it. His glass of water and his cup of coffee were magically present to his need. In the hotel dining-room he heard whispers at his back, and once a sound like smothered laughter, and he tingled with the shamed consciousness of being a show for curious eyes. His face burned throughout the meal, and his eating was largely pretense.

Forbes' engagement with Julia was for ten o'clock. At quarter before the hour, the bell-boy who had taken him in charge conducted him to a stiff little parlor on the second floor, and left him after a whispered explanation to the maid. Time is

proverbially slow-footed from the standpoint of lovers, but as Forbes sat waiting he felt sure that his impatience did not explain the seemingly endless duration of those fifteen minutes. The maid came to him at last to ask if there was anything she could do.

"I'd like to know the time, please."

"Half past eleven, sir."

"Half past eleven," Forbes repeated. Oddly his first emotion was a feeling of relief that Agatha did not know.

The parlor maid was offering encouragement. "Prob'ly something's happened to detain the young lady, sir. But I don't believe she'll be much longer."

"Let us hope not," Forbes replied dryly. The proudest of men, he winced at the unmistakable sympathy of the woman's tone. It was not fair that he should be subjected to such humiliation.

Julia arrived upon the stroke of noon, voluble over some undeniable bargains in blouses. She had stopped at one of the exclusive little shops, preferred by the knowing to the big emporiums, only intending, she explained vivaciously, to make one small purchase. But the woman had kept showing her the loveliest things, and all so reasonable. There

was practically no one in the place, so that it had seemed like shopping in some strange city. And it was worth coming to town in the hot weather just to pick up such bargains.

"I'm glad your effort was not thrown quite away," Forbes remarked with an irony that glanced harmless from Julia's armor.

"Oh, no, Burton, I don't grudge any sacrifice I have made. Getting you out of the clutches of that harpy was worth it all."

She waited for a suitable expression of gratitude from the gentleman she had rescued. After a pause which Forbes failed to fill appropriately, she spoke again, and this time with grave seriousness.

"Now, Burton, it's only two hours before my train leaves and I must have luncheon, so we'd better lose no time deciding on the wisest course to take in this affair."

Again Forbes failed to respond. Julia eyed him suspiciously.

"I hope you haven't an idea of passing this outrage over without taking any action, Burton. It's that sort of laxity that makes criminals."

"Perhaps you have decided on the punishment appropriate to this particular crime," said Forbes, his

voice rich in ironic inflections, which again passed harmlessly over Julia's head.

"To tell the truth, I have. There's only one point on which these mercenary people are really susceptible, and that's money. My advice is to write her that unless she returns every penny you paid her, you will prosecute her for swindling."

"She might not be able to do that, Julia. I judge from what you all say that she must be poor."

"Oh, she's evidently that. Everything about the place is poverty-stricken, and the gown she wore that day was so faded that you could hardly tell the original color. But I believe she has all that money put aside, for don't you remember, the boy said she wanted to send him to school."

"I remember. And you advise me to demand the money she has saved for his schooling, and ask her to charge up my board for those months to charity?"

Julia held to her point. "It's the sort of thing she'd feel, because it's evident there's nothing she wouldn't do for money. I confess I can't comprehend that temperament. Money means so little to me that I simply don't understand how it's possible for people to worship it as they do."

He listened with growing irritation. That this girl who had never earned a dollar, and had never denied herself anything she wanted, should assume so superior an attitude, offended his sense of justice. "Perhaps if you knew more of the value of money," he cut in crisply, "you might respect it more."

"Oh, I know I'm impractical, Burton. Dad was always making fun of me for that." The pensiveness of her tone was still evident as she added, "Perhaps you'd like to have me write the letter before I go."

"What letter?"

"To that woman, of course, threatening to prosecute her unless she returns the money."

His pause was long enough to give the idea that he was considering her suggestion. His tone when at length he spoke, implied nothing of the sort.

"Thank you, Julia. I shall not need your services. And when I write Miss Kent, I shall enclose a check to cover my board till the first of November."

He heard her catch her breath. "You mean you are going to pay a premium for being tricked and deceived?"

"She deceived me and that's not easy for me to

forgive. But I'm hardly ready to sponge my living from a girl who is making a hand-to-hand fight with poverty."

"Dear, it's dreadful the way you men let your chivalry run away with you. I suppose if you were on a jury, you couldn't bring yourself to convict a woman of murder."

"I hardly think Miss Kent's offense can be classed in that category," Forbes said stiffly. "I suffered chiefly through the jolt to my sense of dignity. That's always been a sensitive point with me."

Julia sighed. "I can't bear to have you talk that way, Burton. It's bad enough for Mr. Warren to make light of falsehood and treachery. But it seems to me a person capable of that, is capable of anything." She laid her hand lightly on his. "Trust a woman's intuition, Burton. Let me write that letter."

Her touch not only left him cold, but roused his antagonism. He felt an irritated certainty that he was being played upon. "Thank you, but I have nothing to say to Miss Kent that I can not entrust to a public stenographer."

She did not take away her hand. "Let's not talk of that dreadful woman any more," she said, in a

lowered voice. "Fate has given us this little hour out of the years, and we mustn't waste it."

Her words brought back something Agatha had said, her scathing scorn of those who took the easy way, and then held fate accountable. The remembrance steeled him against the insidious tenderness of her voice.

"You made your choice, Julia, as you had a right to do. And I wish you every happiness."

The fragrance of a delicate perfume he had always associated with her enveloped him. He felt the pressure of her body against his arm.

"What a queer, quiet hotel this is, Burton. Right in the heart of the city and yet we're as much alone as if we were off somewhere in the woods."

Had she been sensitive, she might have perceived a curious rigidity in the arm against which she leaned, an ominous tightening of the obstinately silent lips. Her vanity felt the challenge of his failure to respond. She flung prudence to the winds. "Burton! Burton!" she murmured, and whether her emotion was real or assumed, he did not know, "why don't you kiss me?"

His fastidious recoil was strengthened by the suspicion that she was attempting by playing on his

passion to mold him to her will in the matter of Agatha's punishment. He moved away a little. "Excuse me," he said, "I shouldn't dream of taking such a liberty with the fiancée of Murray Prendergast."

"Oh, don't!" He felt her shudder, and again wondered if it were real, or a pretense. "All the years ahead belong to him, and just this little moment is yours and mine."

"I lay no claim even to a moment of your time, Julia. I asked from you all or nothing."

"Tell me just once that you love me, Burton."

At his continued silence, she drew herself away. "You're different. You don't care for me as you did."

She waited vainly for him to deny the accusation. Then again she caught his hand. She might have been a loyal wife, fearing that her husband's heart was slipping from her grasp and longing to be reassured. "Burton," she implored, "tell me whether you love me."

"I thank God—no."

She fell back, and he could hear her stormy breathing. Well as he knew every inflection of her voice, he hardly recognized it when she spoke again.

"That wretched woman! That creature! She's to blame. She's stolen your heart from me."

"Don't be a fool." The brutality, foreign as it was to Forbes' training and temperament, seemed demanded by the occasion. "My heart and all the rest of me was yours while you chose to keep me. You threw me away like a worn glove when my trouble came, and looked about for a more fitting match."

"Burton, you said yourself—"

"I own I made your way easy for you, Julia. I was fool enough to be satisfied to have you yourself and made no inconvenient demands in the way of loyalty and truth. And the fate you are so fond of invoking was kinder to me than I deserved."

"You love her. You love that abandoned—"

"Stop!" he commanded. "Don't dare finish." But he himself went on talking rapidly. "As far as Miss Kent is concerned, of course I have made it impossible for her ever to think well of me again, since after her months of uninterrupted kindness, I could listen to your venomous attack upon her, and not speak a word in her defense."

"How dare you! How dare you speak like that to me!"

"Whether I love her or not, I don't know. It's too bewildering for me to be sure. But I know she's the most loyal friend, and the dearest comrade and the bravest, most unselfish—"

Julia sprang from her place beside him with a cry. His face was toward her, and at the sound of her voice, an extraordinary thing happened. He saw her for an instant quite distinctly, though the face he had loved had undergone as hideous a change as if death and decay had done their devastating work upon it. Secure in the knowledge of his blindness, she faced him with the mask thrown aside. He saw her features distorted by hate, her eyes narrowed malignantly, her lips drawn back from the teeth. Something Hephzibah Diggs had said in their memorable interview flashed across his mind. "When she showed herself up for what she was, you'd ought to have got down on your marrow bones and thanked the Lord."

Darkness shut down over the unwelcome vision. There was a rushing in his ears so that he heard only faintly Julia's farewell, "I hate you! Oh, how I hate you!" He leaned back against the cushions, realizing that he was a sick man, but enveloped in a strange serenity. When next the parlor maid

proffered her services, he sent her to telephone for his physician. An hour later he was comfortably ensconced in a private hospital on the outskirts of the city, and sick as he felt, his mood was increasingly cheerful, for the doctor considered the momentary return of vision, elusive and disappointing as it had been, most encouraging.

It was a week before Forbes was equal to dictating a letter to Agatha. He passed over the peculiar circumstances of their parting, expressed rather formally his sense of gratitude and enclosed a generous check. His acknowledgment came with gratifying promptness. But the nurse on opening the envelope was puzzled.

"It doesn't seem a letter at all, just bits of paper. Why, it looks like a check, torn into little pieces."

"You can't find the number of the check among the scraps, can you?" asked Forbes.

The nurse could and did and Forbes' suspicion became certainty. He turned on his pillow, unreasonably wounded. The Agatha Kent he had loved and trusted had never been, and this stranger who called herself by the familiar name had rejected his overture of friendship.

CHAPTER XX

THE DAY AFTER

THE day of judgment has its drawbacks, but it is the day after that really hurts. The first shock numbs. It is when the nipping pain begins, the remorseless pain too cruel to kill, that the sinner takes the full measure of his punishment.

On the day of Forbes' departure, Agatha ate her evening meal as usual and went to bed at eight o'clock. She slept heavily till midnight, roused and speedily dozed off again, but now to be the victim of torturing dreams.

Years before a pet dog of Howard's had become old and sickly and Agatha's father had decided it must be killed. He had attempted to shoot the animal in its sleep, but his nervousness had caused him to miss his aim. It had taken three shots to finish the business. Agatha had come upon the scene just in time to see the look the dying brute turned on its idolized master, and the incident had stamped itself

on her memory as the supreme tragedy in her experience. She invariably dreamed of it when feverish and ill. This night she underwent the familiar agony with a difference. In the grotesque necromancy of the dream-world, the wounded dog had become Forbes, turning his stricken gaze upon the friend who had done him to death. She woke in a cold sweat and did not sleep again.

At four o'clock she was up and cleaning house as the one adequate antidote for the remorseful thoughts that threatened to wreck her reason. She worked furiously all the morning, barely stopping to eat. Miss Finch watched her from a distance, heart-wrung and afraid, but knowing from experience that at certain crises Agatha was best left to herself. Howard, with the characteristic masculine reluctance to witness suffering out of his power to relieve, took his fishing rod and departed for a day of his favorite sport.

About two o'clock in the afternoon, Ridgeley Warren came strolling up the driveway between the rows of stately trees which made the battered old house at the end of the avenue appear an anti-climax, and so reached her unheralded. Agatha had thrown a braided rug across the clothes-line and was beat-

ing it as if she had a personal spite against each individual rag. The sun was full on her hair and despite her menial occupation, she seemed to him a splendid figure, furiously vital, crowned with light. Excitement whipped up his pulses as he left the driveway and walked across the grass in her direction, but when near enough to make his voice heard above the volley of blows, he only said nonchalantly, "Good afternoon, Hephzibah."

Agatha turned and stood panting. She had been working at high pressure since daybreak, and close inspection revealed not a masquerading goddess but a tired, bedraggled girl. Her hair had slipped from the restraining pins and a wayward coil partly extinguished one eye. Her fair skin was clouded by successive layers of dirt. A disfiguring smudge successfully effaced the dimple in her chin. With quickening admiration Warren realized that this soiled and disheveled apparition still had a distinct claim to beauty.

"Hard at work, I see, Hephzibah." He stood with his hands in his pockets, immaculate in his light summer clothing, and as always he roused her to defiance.

"My name is Kent. Please use it."

"I'm ready to call you anything you please, my dear spitfire. Only remember that it's not my fault that I've always thought of you as Hephzibah."

Agatha glared at him. His presence restored her poise. She realized that as an antidote Warren was better than a thousand years of house-cleaning.

"I don't know why you should think of me as Hephzibah or anything else. I don't know why you shouldn't dismiss me from your mind altogether as I should like to dismiss you."

"Out of the question, Hephzibah, or Miss Agatha Kent, if you like that better. You see, you interest me."

"I'm sorry I can't return the compliment, but you bore me—excruciatingly."

"To begin with," Warren explained analytically, "you are the prettiest girl I know, bar none. And in the second place, I'm inclined to believe you're the brainiest. If what they told me last night is true, you ought to make your fortune on the stage."

Agatha regarded him silently and the antagonism died out of her face. He was almost sorry, for it left her white and wan and rather pitiful.

"You know what a fraud I am, then?" she said wistfully.

"I know you're the cleverest girl of my acquaintance, if you could get by with a thing like that."

"I suppose he simply despises me." Into Agatha's mind had flashed the preposterous hope that possibly Warren's tolerant attitude toward her escapade was shared by the only man who counted.

"Who? Forbes? Why the devil should you care what he thinks? Old Forbes was always a bit of a prig."

Positive hatred looked out of Agatha's eyes. "Oh, I don't know. I shouldn't call a man a prig simply because he objected to being tricked and deceived and lied to. I suppose he has a high enough ideal of women so that he expects a girl to tell the truth, just as much as if she were a man. I consider that attitude a compliment, myself."

Warren was somewhat staggered. "Then I suppose I'm insulting you by thinking you are a darned clever kid, and the rest of them a pack of fools for making a fuss over nothing."

Agatha left him in doubt on this delicate point. The little hope that had stirred in her heart had died almost as soon as it was born, and the resulting anguish seemed out of all proportion to its brief existence. Forbes did not share Warren's leniency to-

ward her summer's masquerade. He was one of the fools who condemned her. She looked away toward the hills and suddenly her face twisted in passionate weeping.

"Don't do that, Hephzibah. For God's sake, don't cry. Can't you let me help you, little girl? You need a friend I'm sure, and there's nothing I'd like better than to help you. You've bewitched me, Hephzibah. I lost my head over you when I thought you were an ignorant little country girl, murdering the king's English every time you opened your mouth. And the more I know of you, the more wonderful you seem. I'm crazy about you."

Agatha's sobs quieted as she listened. When a woman has been humiliated beyond a certain point, nothing can restore her self-esteem like being made love to by a personable man. Warren's irreproachable costume, his good looks, his convincing air of prosperity all helped in her struggle against intolerable mortification. Yet though she dried her eyes at his agitated request, and favored him with a faint, watery smile, she thought of him, if the truth be told, less as a lover than as a life-preserver.

Warren sat upon the porch and smoked while

Agatha made herself presentable. It took her some time and he was not sorry, for he wanted a chance to get himself in hand. He had said very much more than he had intended to say when he bought his ticket that morning, and though he did not exactly regret his indiscretion, he told himself that he had better go slow. Twenty-four hours earlier the name Agatha Kent had suggested to him a benevolent old lady with a double chin, the chin an entirely gratuitous contribution of his active imagination. Hephzibah Diggs was a beautiful but deplorably ignorant country girl who had got herself into trouble, like many another ignorant beauty. It was too soon to propose to either. Yet as he glanced impatiently at his watch, Warren realized that the charm of Agatha was her unexpectedness. You never knew what she was going to do. You never could tell what she might make you do, in spite of your better judgment.

Agatha's delay gave him the time he needed. She presented herself in a faded gingham which nevertheless had the advantage of being freshly laundered, her heavy hair wound about her head with a negligence a woman would have interpreted to mean that to Agatha, her caller mattered very little. Now

that her face was clean he saw how pale she was, and how dark the circles under her eyes, and this discovery was responsible for an unwonted gentleness in his manner. He talked as a big brother might have talked, and the instinctive, virginal defiance which his unconcealed admiration had always roused in her, changed by imperceptible degrees to confidence.

He asked her bluntly about her finances and she told him without hesitation or evasion. He hinted at monetary assistance and she stopped him midway, with an imperious tilt of her chin and a haughty stare. "You are not talking to Hephzibah Diggs," she reminded him.

Warren sighed and changed his tactics. "Did you ever think of selling your place?"

"I'm afraid nobody would want it, it's so dreadfully old and tumbledown. And besides we've got to have a roof over our heads."

"You couldn't sell it here, of course. But there are possibilities in this place. A small summer hotel ought to do well. Magnificent old trees, fine view, convenient to the city." He studied his surroundings with an appraising eye. "It should bring at least fifteen thousand if you found the right purchaser."

She caught her breath and the sound brought his eyes back to her face. What he saw touched him profoundly. Indeed he felt the smart of tears under his drooping lids. "My God," he said to himself, "to have her look like that over a paltry fifteen thousand."

"Then I could send Howard to college," Agatha was saying, breathlessly.

"Sure you could."

"And there would be enough to take care of Fritz —Miss Finch, as long as she lives."

"I hope you'd do something for Hephzibah Diggs," said Warren gruffly, to hide his emotion. "That girl has something coming to her, believe me!"

Warren spent most of his leisure entertaining people, but he seldom felt better repaid than when Agatha greeted this jest with a quiver of laughter.

"I promise you she shall have a new gingham, perhaps a party dress if the money holds out."

"Yes, that's what Hephzibah would want, a party dress," said Warren. "And I speak for the first dance the first time she wears it." He went on to discuss sales and investments, and Agatha hung upon his words. He perceived that the practical line

appealed to her. His tentative love-making bored and angered her. When he talked of gilt-edged first mortgages, bringing six per cent., she leaned toward him, her reddish-gold eyes melting into his, and seemed ready to leap into his arms.

The carriage he had ordered came for him at what he considered a ridiculously early hour and he kept it waiting while he explained that he would immediately take up the matter of the sale of her property with several people who might possibly be interested. She let him hold her hand while he protracted his good-by to an unconscionable length, and he argued well from this, till she disconcerted him by saying faintly, "Shall you see Mr. Forbes soon?"

"I can't say. The fair Julia may have hustled him away before I'm back."

"If—if you should see him," said Agatha, her lips white, "try to make him think kindly of me. Try to make him understand that I didn't realize that I was doing anything wrong."

"To be sure I will," replied Warren with misleading heartiness. "But if a man is such a blasted fool as to need that assurance, it's not worth troubling your little head about him, don't you see?" And

then he said good-by again and went off in an unprecedentedly bad humor, damning Forbes wholeheartedly all the way to town.

Warren's call left Miss Finch pleasurably excited. For a man to come out from the city for a few hours' talk with a girl, argued his intentions serious. And Agatha's abstraction, the dreamy look in her eyes, the irrelevant nature of her replies to the simplest questions, seemed to imply a gratifying responsiveness in her mood. Little did the innocent spinster dream that Agatha's absorption was due to calculating the wisest expenditure of an income derived from an investment of fifteen thousand dollars in first mortgages at six per cent.

But Miss Finch's elation was short-lived, for Howard came home with a startling piece of news. "Heard the funniest thing to-day. Who do you suppose has been getting married?"

To please him Agatha hazarded a guess. Howard shook his head.

"It's the last one you'd ever think of. Old Billygoat Wiggins. He married a widow out on the Jericho pike and I guess he's had six or seven wives already."

Without attempting to correct her brother's ex-

aggeration, Agatha cast an apprehensive glance in Miss Finch's direction. Miss Finch met her look with an air of resolute calm. At last the matter was settled. Now that one of her lovers was out of the running, the only thing left was to take the other. Her days of anxious deliberation, due to weighing one man against his rival, were over, and it was a great relief. "Mrs. James Doolittle," said Miss Finch to herself and blushed high. Well, Doolittle was as good a name as Wiggins. "I b'lieve if anything, it's a little more aristocratic," Miss Finch decided.

But as the evening wore on, she found herself disquieted. In her thoughts of James Doolittle there was little of roseate illusion. She saw him mentally as she had seen him uncounted times in reality, his trousers patched and bagging at the knees, his shirt soiled and faded, his hat suggesting that some predatory animal had taken frequent bites out of the rim. "I do like a man to look neat," sighed Miss Finch. She recalled too, the tumbledown cottage where James Doolittle had kept bachelor's hall since his mother's death six years earlier, and compared it disadvantageously with her present quarters. Romance had spread her wings, and taken flight. Mar-

riage had become a very drab, prosaic affair. But there was no help for it.

Miss Finch retired to her room rather early and wrote Mr. Doolittle accepting the offer of marriage made nearly two months before. It was a prim little note and if her delay had been unflattering, there was nothing in her formula of acceptance to restore the masculine *amour propre*. She said that marriage was a very serious matter, and she hoped they were making no mistake. She signed her name Zaida Finch, and realizing that the compact signature would soon be replaced by that of an unknown female, Zaida Doolittle, she shed some agitated tears.

The letter was sealed and stamped on the table beside her and Miss Finch was lying awake wondering whether the tongue of slander would be set wagging if she should decide on giving the Doolittle cottage a thorough cleaning before taking the step that would make her its permanent mistress, when Phemie came blundering up the stairs.

Miss Finch sprang out of bed and, candle in hand, appeared in the doorway. She shook a chiding finger at the girl. "Don't make such a racket," she hissed. "Everybody's been in bed for hours. You

oughtn't to stay out so late, Phemie. It don't look right in a young girl."

Phemie did not seem aware that she was being scolded. She was full of silly giggles and pleased to find a confidante to share her amusement. She pushed her way uninvited into Miss Finch's room.

"I never had so much fun in my life," wheezed Phemie in what she mistakenly supposed to be a whisper. "Oh, my goodness, I've laughed fit to bust myself."

"Where've you been?" demanded Miss Finch, eying her disapprovingly.

"I've been to a shivaree. Whole crowd of us went. We had horns and tin pans and Ernie Cox took a cow-bell along. Oh, my goodness!" Phemie placed her hands on her hips, and rocked back and forth in an ecstasy of mirth.

Miss Finch's severity became more pronounced. "I think you might have been in better business. Deacon Wiggins has been married quite a few times, I know, but he's a good citizen and a pillar of the church."

" 'Twarn't Deacon Wiggins. 'Twas Jim Doolittle. He just got married to that cross-eyed old maid who used to work at Phelps' store."

When Miss Finch could get rid of Phemie she tore the letter she had so painstakingly composed into the minutest fragments, promising herself to burn them in the morning before any one was up. Innocent as her intentions had been, the fact remained that she had written a compromising letter to a married man, and she could not feel safe till the sole evidence of her indiscretion had been reduced to ashes. As she climbed back into bed she might perhaps have been excused for indulging in pessimistic reflections on masculine perfidy, and the hollowness of lovers' vows, but in point of fact her mood was eminently Christian. To her own secret amazement she was chiefly conscious of overwhelming relief.

The critical relatives of Deacon Wiggins' three deceased partners were nothing to her. Mr. Doolittle's tendency to wear his trousers with only one frail suspender as a support was no concern of hers, except as any respectable spinster might venture to hope that his rashness would not carry him too far. That good old name Finch, which had been identified with her personality for half a century, would not be exchanged for any unfamiliar polysyllable. Without knowing it, she had been shrinkingly ap-

prehensive of coming changes, and now everything was going on exactly as it had before.

"If Agatha marries Mr. Warren and has a family of children," thought Miss Finch, "she'll need somebody reliable in the house. And if she doesn't get a husband, I ought to be around to look after her. And anyway, nobody can ever say that the reason I never married is that I never had a chance."

And so comforting was that concluding thought that even after sleep claimed her as its own, a complacent, almost a triumphant smile, hovered about Miss Finch's parted lips.

CHAPTER XXI

ENLIGHTENMENT

WARREN stamped the snow from his feet, shook himself like a wet dog, and entering the apartment hotel, passed at a step from the frigid zone to the tropics. At the desk he gave his name to a businesslike young woman who ascertained over the telephone that Mr. Forbes was in, and forthwith Warren was shot to the fifth floor. A smiling Japanese boy opened the door of Forbes' rooms, and Forbes himself came forward and gripped his friend's hand.

For a moment neither man found speech possible. "Congratulations, old fellow," Warren got out at last. "Best news I've heard for many a moon."

He gave his snowy coat to the waiting servant, seated himself and lighted a cigarette as a preliminary to conversation. "Well, how does it seem to have two eyes again? A bit intoxicating, I fancy. Rather like too much champagne."

"You know when a man has suffered enough, his

idea of perfect happiness is to have the pain stop," Forbes answered. "I suppose the only way to size up a blessing at its real value is to have to do without it for a time." His words seemed to meet the requirements in the case, but Warren's quick ear detected in his voice a note of melancholy, and he thought he knew the explanation. Not being remarkable for tact, he promptly broached the delicate subject.

"Well, the fair Julia has done it. I got her cards week before last. Gosh, when you see the fellows the dear girls marry, it almost seems a compliment when they turn you down. You'd think it would take more than the Prendergast money and family connections and all that, to sugarcoat a pill like Murray."

"I wish her more happiness than she's likely to have, I'm afraid." Forbes spoke formally, his manner implying that it might be as well for Warren to change the subject, but his visitor took his time.

"Oh, well, Julia isn't capable of real unhappiness. She could be uncomfortable, or disappointed, or humiliated, or anything that doesn't go too deep, but unhappiness is beyond her. That other little girl now, she's different."

Forbes did not ask what girl was referred to. He kept his eyes on the floor.

"Julia looks as soft as a ripe plum," Warren continued. "Most of the dear creatures do, as if a rough word would crush them. But believe me, she's made of the same hard, calculating stuff as her old man. You never heard of old Studley's losing any sleep over the men he'd ruined on the street, did you? Julia won't have a wrinkle when she's sixty. If anybody is going to marry Murray Prendergast it ought to be that kind of woman."

If Forbes agreed with this frank expression of opinion, he gave no sign. He had the appearance of waiting patiently for the other to finish.

"Our little friend Hephzibah," continued Warren, "is the sort whose hair turns white in a single night, you know. Not that hers has—God forbid. You never saw that hair, my boy. You've got something to live for."

Forbes made a gesture of impatience. "Do you happen to know Miss Kent's address at the present time?"

"Do you happen to *want* Miss Kent's address at the present time?" mocked Warren truculently.

Forbes hesitated. "Yes," he said with a seeming

effort at frankness, "I do. Some of the things that were said, Warren, about her poverty, you remember, caused me considerable uneasiness. I felt that my leaving as I did when she had counted on having me until the cold weather, might have embarrassed her, and whatever ground I may have had for resentment, I had no wish to add to her financial worries. And so I sent her a check for the full amount I would have paid for board, up to the first of November."

Warren laughed sardonically. "Oh, you did, did you?"

"Yes, I did." Forbes' manner was a trifle aggrieved. "She returned it."

"Of course!"

"Perhaps you are in her confidence," Forbes said in a tone of annoyance.

"She never mentioned that particular matter to me. But I am glad to believe that she repays my friendship by a degree of trust."

Forbes waited a moment before continuing his explanation. "I did not write her again for some time. I was rather put out by the return of the check, foolishly, I suppose. But the last of November I sent her a rather long letter. You know,

Ridgeley, when all is said and done, the girl saved my life."

"Well?"

"The letter came back to me from the Dead Letter Office. I thought it was a trick of some sort. It seemed incredible, you know, that when her family has been living at Oak Knoll for generations, she should drop out of sight and leave no more trace than an extinguished candle flame. I sent Evans down to look her up, and he reported that the three of them, Miss Kent, her foster brother, Howard, and Miss Finch, had all left town, and none of the old neighbors could give him any information as to their whereabouts. The old place has been sold to some one who is planning to build a summer hotel on the site."

Warren nodded. "I engineered that deal. It's a good location for such an enterprise. She sold for twelve thousand. I think I could have got her two or three thousand more, if she had been willing to wait, but she wasn't."

Forbes tried to appear relieved. "Twelve thousand! Well, I am glad to know she is not in immediate need. At the same time, Ridgeley, I should like her address."

Warren eyed him with malevolence. "It looks to me as if she wasn't particularly anxious for you to have it."

Forbes reddened. "Nonsense! Don't be an ass, Warren. It's quite important that I should have a talk with Miss Kent."

"I suppose you want to be sure that she's sufficiently penitent for the deception she practised on you."

"Really, my dear fellow, I can hardly see that it is any of your business what I have to say to her."

"Simply that I'm a friend of the lady's. And the only reason that I'm not her husband is that she's refused me, by letter and word of mouth, just eleven times by actual count. A singularly consistent character, our Hephzibah."

Forbes sat biting his lips. "I'm very sorry, Warren. I needn't say I had no idea—"

"Of course you had no idea. You took her devotion as a matter of course. You let your Julia insult her without speaking a word in her defense. And it never occurred to you that another man might think her unselfishness and her courage and her beauty and her wit made her a woman in a million."

"I must correct you on one point," Forbes said

stiffly. "It is true the discovery that Miss Kent was not what I supposed her took me by surprise and I was both hurt and angry. But the engagement between Miss Studley and myself was broken finally and irrevocably because I defended—partly at least—the course Miss Kent had taken." He hesitated before adding, "If you really wish to marry her—"

"Oh, to hell with your *'ifs!'* I've been on my knees to her from the first minute I saw her. I'd marry her if she were Hephzibah Diggs."

"I was only going to say, Ridgeley, that if you are in earnest, you are pretty sure to win out. I can hardly imagine any woman's continuing to turn you down."

Warren did not appear touched by the obvious sincerity of this tribute. He glowered at the other man ill-naturedly.

"I dare say she would have married me but for one thing. I came on the scene too late."

"Too late?"

"Another man got ahead of me. She couldn't love me because she loved him."

"Do you mean that she's engaged?"

"Damn you!" Warren shouted furiously. "Don't put on those unconscious airs with me. You know

well enough what man I mean, and you know whether you're engaged to her or not."

"You're out of your mind, Warren. You're talking like an insane man."

"Let it go at that, then. Call it that I'm crazy."

"If you will remember that I thought Miss Kent an elderly woman, you will realize that I—"

"Oh, your immaculate skirts are clean," exclaimed Warren, with preposterous bitterness. "You didn't make love to the nice old lady who was your father's boyhood flame. But you were so helpless and so darned pathetic and so dependent on her that you didn't have to. She's not like Julia, looking for an easy berth and a through ticket. Her idea of love is giving, giving without keeping count."

"You don't know what you're talking about," said Forbes, but with less conviction.

"Don't I, though! Do you remember the scheme we hatched to send Hephzibah to school?"

Forbes nodded.

"I came up and had a talk with her. Of course she was playing a part, but it wasn't all play-acting. She practically told me there was somebody she cared for. She—hang it all, Forbes, she's not always the audacious little devil who can palm her-

self off on an intelligent man as her own great-aunt, and never miss a cog. There was a look on her face when she spoke of that man—she was all angel, then."

"But what possible reason have you for thinking —why, you make me feel an ass for listening." Forbes' humility was so obvious as to be disarming.

"I know you're the man. She was always at me to have a talk with you and plead her cause, you know."

"But surely that wouldn't mean—"

"Yes, if you'd seen her eyes. You know how a dog looks when his master kicks him. Like that."

"Good God, Warren—"

"Oh, I don't suppose you like it," said Warren grimly. "But let me remind you that if it's unpleasant for you to listen, it's hell for me to tell you. I suppose you know what brought Julia to Oak Knoll to rescue you by force of arms."

"I believe Miss Kent wrote a letter."

"Yes, under pretense of congratulating Julia on her prospective engagement, she wrote her that you had been spending the most of your summer in the company of an attractive young girl. She'd sized up

Julia's disposition pretty cleverly and she reckoned that if anything would hold her back, it would be a suspicion that there was a flaw in her title to your life-long devotion."

"But surely if she had felt as you imagine—"

"We're talking of Hephzibah, you know," growled Warren. "She was thinking of *your* happiness, not of hers. Of course she knew she was taking a long shot. She was too smart to miss that little point. She risked exposure to give you what you wanted. That's the sort she is." He added gloomily, "I don't know why I'm such a fool as to tell you all this. I suppose it's because I know I haven't the ghost of a chance."

There was a long, depressing silence. "Well," said Forbes at length, his voice curiously shaken, "where shall I find her?"

"Good God, man, I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"The last word I had from her was a Christmas card and the blasted post-mark was so blurred that I couldn't make out where it was mailed. And in November I had this letter. You might as well read it, I suppose."

He took the worn missive from his pocket, handed it to Forbes, and began to smoke furiously. Forbes, his face very pale, read without comment.

"MY DEAR MR. WARREN:

"Well, the thing is accomplished. I am a capitalist, a woman of wealth, and also a wanderer on the face of the earth. But I'm not worrying about that side of it, it's so delicious to feel that all this money is mine and that I can have a trunk full of new clothes if I feel like it.

"Howard left for school yesterday. He will be a little behind his class, but the principal thinks he will have no difficulty in catching up if he is willing to work. Howard is so ambitious and eager that I know he is going to make me proud of him.

"You see I am sending you a check. It was awfully good of you to want to put this deal through because of your interest in me, but I can't help thinking it's better to be businesslike in business and friendly in friendship. So this check is for the celebrated lawyer, Mr. Warren, who has managed this affair so wonderfully, and my heart-felt gratitude is for my dear friend, Ridgeley Warren, whose kindness and generosity have been so much more than I deserved. I shall never forget it. When I am a wrinkled old woman, and can smile at some of the things that hurt now, it will warm my heart to remember your goodness.

"Dear Mr. Warren, I am not going to write you again at present. I have a feeling that if you keep on seeing me, you are more likely to keep on wish-

ing for something it is better for you to forget. I am sure your generosity has more to do with your feeling than you have any idea of, and that when I am no longer at hand to make a continual appeal to your sympathy, you will soon be your usual self. I hope you will love the most beautiful and noblest girl in the world and marry her, and if you ever have reason to think that she doesn't appreciate the fact that she has drawn a prize, just send for me and I'll open her eyes.

"Words seem such inadequate things, don't they, when one's heart is full? I wish you could know all I mean when I say, Thank you.

"Gratefully yours,

"AGATHA KENT.

"P. S. You will, I am sure, be seeing Mr. Forbes soon. The greatest favor you can do me is to make him understand how thoughtlessly I entered on the deception he so naturally resents. You see we were such good friends in a way—he really liked me and trusted me while he thought I was somebody else—it hurts to realize how completely I have forfeited his good opinion. You seem to understand so well that perhaps you may influence him to think of me a little more kindly."

Forbes folded the letter and gave it to its owner. "You deserve her if any man does, Ridgeley," he said with proper humility.

"I deserve her more than you do, if that's what you're trying to say," barked Warren. "And now

you see what we're up against. Between us we've lost all trace of her."

"We must find her again," Forbes said firmly.

Warren's hostile gaze challenged him. "What for? Do you want to rub it in how she's outraged the sacred name of truth and all that rot?"

"No."

"Perhaps you're going to be magnanimous enough to forgive her?"

"Possibly," Forbes offered quietly, "I want to ask her to forgive me."

Warren's unhappy eyes met his full. "I suppose I'm in a rotten humor, old man. I do think you're a damned sight luckier than you deserve to be. But let it go. The question is, how are we to find her?"

As one result of the deliberations protracted over several hours, the following advertisement appeared in the leading newspapers of a dozen large cities:

"Information wanted. Any person acquainted with the present whereabouts of Hephzibah Diggs will confer a favor by communicating at once with the undersigned."

The anxious weeks went by. The two men consulted almost daily, with growing perplexity and diminishing hope. And Agatha made no sign.

CHAPTER XXI

FELLOW TRAVELERS

THE hat Agatha was adjusting before the mirror was a black toque with a quill at the side. On most heads it would have possessed no more individuality than a clover blossom. It was one of the hats which apparently are planned with a view to being inconspicuous. But as Agatha pinned it in place it seemed to assume a certain provocative quality. It became a challenge to the masculine eye.

The same was true of the blue serge suit she wore. Nothing can be imagined more innocuous than a suit of blue serge, embellished with narrow black braid. Miss Finch could have worn one of the identical cut and material and it would have looked as if it had been designed for her. Yet on Agatha the blue serge was alluring. It captured the eye as though striped with scarlet.

Mrs. Van Horne, a stout, middle-aged woman

who occupied a swivel chair at a businesslike desk, watched the operation of adjusting the black toque and rubbed her nose with a flourish indicating mental perturbation. It had occurred to her that Agatha was a somewhat colorful person for the task to which she had been assigned, that she looked undeniably youthful for so responsible an errand, that some one grayer in tone and of an aspect radiating propriety and decorum, would have been better fitted for the duty in hand. Mrs. Van Horne looked at the clock, saw it lacked but thirty-seven minutes to train time, and brushed aside her scruples. It was now too late to change.

"You are sure you feel equal to taking charge of the four, Miss Kent?" she said, more for the reassuring effect of Agatha's self-confident answer than because she had the slightest doubt what that answer would be.

Agatha turned a vivacious face. "I'm really looking forward to the trip. It'll be such fun."

"I should hardly use that term to describe traveling in charge of four children," observed Mrs. Van Horne, with a grim smile. "And one of them a teething baby. You will naturally attract a good deal of attention."

"Not a bit," said Agatha briskly.

"You think not?"

"Every one will take it for granted that I am a young mother, coming home with my little family to visit grandpa and grandma."

Mrs. Van Horne's brow cleared. As the representative of a serious-minded organization, with an established reputation for prudence and sagacity, she had been accusing herself of indiscretion in entrusting this important commission to a young woman of such butterfly aspect, even though in self-defense she insisted that of her assistants, Miss Kent was easily the most resourceful and capable. Agatha's suggestion brought relief. Without doubt she was right. The traveling public would assume her to be a matron of extraordinarily youthful appearance. No one would question the discretion of the head of the Hamilton Orphanage for committing four children to the care of one who, whatever her capacity, looked a fly-away girl.

"I imagine you are right, Miss Kent," she said. "And if I were you, I should take no pains to correct the impression. It will save you a great many annoying questions."

A maid appeared with news that the taxi had ar-

rived. A nurse brought in the baby, hooded and cloaked for its journey. Outside on the steps waited the three older children, about to be placed in homes which had been duly inspected and approved by authorized representatives of the orphanage. As Agatha assembled her charges and led the way to the cab, little faces appeared at the windows, small hands waved farewells and a chorus of shrill voices called good-by. An irrepressible little orphan of a plainness which so far had defied the efforts of the society to place her in a desirable home, came running to the curb as Agatha was arranging her charges about her. "I don't want anybody to 'dopt you, Miss Kent," she quavered.

"Bless your heart!" Agatha leaned out and kissed her squarely. "No one's going to adopt me. I'll be back by Saturday."

As the cab rattled down the street, Agatha turned for a look at the square, uncompromising building where she had found a haven six months before. Despite the opulent tone of her letter to Warren, Agatha had fully realized that twelve thousand dollars does not constitute wealth. Howard's education was provided for, and that was an enormous relief, but her responsibility for Miss Finch still lay

heavy on her heart and she was determined not to draw on her principal any more than was absolutely necessary. The opening at the Hamilton Orphanage had come to her through a series of fortunate accidents, and Agatha had flung herself into the work with an enthusiasm which had insured her immediate success. Agatha loved the orphanage and the orphans. The maternal instinct, always strong in her, exulted in the swarm of children on whom she could lavish herself. There was no urchin so refractory that Agatha could not find excuses for him, no little face so plain that she could not discern in it something of winsomeness. She saw the humor in the naughtiness of some unruly youngster where most of her associates perceived only irrefutable confirmation of the doctrine of original sin. Mrs. Van Horne, accustomed to aids who did their duty with automatic faithfulness, found Agatha too good to be true.

Miss Finch boarded in the vicinity of the orphanage and Agatha spent with her all the time she was not on duty. It had been hard to reconcile Miss Finch to being in the same city with Warren and not acquainting him with the fact. The sudden termination of her own double romance had intensified

her passionate interest in Agatha's love-affairs. She thought of the subject continually. She dreamed of Agatha as a bride lovely in creamy silk and floating veil. She harped on the subject till Agatha's nerves suffered and sometimes she betrayed her irritation in speech.

Agatha was not thinking either of Warren or Forbes as she was bounced to the station, the baby in her arms and the three other children mixed in indistinguishably with the luggage. Children are an admirable antidote to unprofitable thinking, because of their capacity for demanding one's entire attention. There were two little girls between three and four years, who looked rather like twins, but were not even sisters, and there was a boy soon to be five. The baby was just getting old enough to be afraid of strangers and was fretful because of teething. It did not look as if Agatha would have many minutes for meditating on the hardships of her own lot.

At the station, with the aid of two sympathetic porters, Agatha got her charges aboard the Pullman and settled herself comfortably some minutes in advance of the other passengers. As they entered by ones and twos, she was aware of interested glances

in her direction, in some cases the interest blended with apprehension. "Horrors!" she heard one woman say to her husband as she passed. Agatha looked after her darkly. She was instantly convinced that the speaker was the owner of a toy poodle.

A moment before the train pulled out, a man came into the Pullman and took his seat in the section opposite hers, glancing amiably at the promising little family across the aisle. Agatha shrank away from the look, feeling faint and sick. There was an ominous ringing in her ears. So strong was her sense of panic that if she had had another moment in which to act, she might have marshalled her brood off the train and trusted to finding some excuse that would satisfy Mrs. Van Horne. But before her impulse toward flight had time to crystallize, the last "All aboard" had been shouted. The train shuddered, groaned and moved out.

As the clear daylight replaced the semi-darkness of the terminal station, Agatha blushed furiously. She sat huddled in her corner, awaiting the outcome like a criminal who anticipates arrest. Gradually her unreasoning alarm was replaced by coherent thinking. If Forbes were still blind, she might

travel as his fellow passenger to the Pacific coast without his being the wiser. But he had come on board unattended, moving freely and fearlessly. If his sight had been restored, she was still safe, for he had never seen her face.

After a time she brought her courage to the point of stealing a glance at him. A newspaper lay upon his knee, and though he was not reading at the moment, its presence confirmed the impression she had formed as he entered. He could see again. She found herself trembling for gladness and swallowing hard at an obstinate lump in her throat. The dark spectacles he had worn throughout his sojourn at Oak Knoll had been replaced by a pair of eyeglasses, which, to her prejudiced judgment, added to his air of distinction. Now that her first unreasonable terror had subsided, she found his proximity delightfully exhilarating.

The next thought brought a pang. If he could see again there was no longer a barrier between himself and Julia. Agatha's duties at the Hamilton Orphanage left her little time for perusing the society columns, so prominent a feature of the city journals, and she had missed the detailed accounts of Julia's wedding, with their emphasis on the

beauty of the bride and the family connections of the groom. If he were about to marry Julia, Agatha reasoned, he should look very happy. She peered interrogatively in his direction to settle this important point, encountered his eyes unexpectedly, and looked away in crimson confusion.

Forbes found the domestic group in such close proximity more entertaining than his newspaper. He thought he had never seen a prettier picture of radiant motherhood than this lovely young creature with her little ones around her. It was a pity, he reflected, that none of the children had inherited her rare beauty. They were all wholesome little youngsters, bidding fair to grow to commonplace maturity as far as externals were concerned. He found himself forming a somewhat uncomplimentary picture of the father of the quartet, a rather heavy, gross individual with a muddy skin.

Other people than Forbes found an irresistible attraction in the family group. The woman Agatha had branded as the owner of a poodle, an overfed blonde, came down the aisle and paused to settle some points on which she was uncertain. Agatha, mindful of Mrs. Van Horne's injunction, gave the desired information as to the sex of the baby and

the brand of artificial food she favored, without any hint that her sense of responsibility was less than maternal.

"Are the little girls twins?" quizzed the stout woman, with an arrogant assumption of having every right to know.

"No, the curly-haired one is the older."

"They must have come very close," said the stout woman disapprovingly.

"There is about six months' difference," replied Agatha unthinkingly. The stout woman's start told her too late what she had done, but as no satisfactory explanation occurred to her, she sat stolidly making a pretense of being absorbed in soothing the fretful baby. Her late interrogator, assuming the reply to be an impertinent substitute for telling her to mind her own business, stalked away, her manner implying that she washed her hands of Agatha and her family.

Agatha had no time for unavailing grief. Four children under five are capable of providing abundant occupation for the most strenuous nature. She was rising for the third time in twenty minutes to minister to the wants of the oldest boy who had an-

nounced emphatically that he was "fursty," when Forbes stepped across the aisle.

"Just let me wait on him," he said. "At this rate you will be worn out before you reach the end of your journey."

The sound of his clear voice was almost her undoing. She wanted to laugh; she wanted to cry. She wanted most of all to put her head down on his broad shoulder and cling to him till he had forgiven her. As none of these things appeared feasible, she contented herself with saying, "Thank you," in a voice so faint as hardly to be audible.

Forbes gave the restless lad a drink of water and took him into his section. Agatha heard her charge announcing in a penetrating voice that his name was Charlie Briggs, whether in answer to a question or not, she was not sure. Then the small boy nestled close to the big man, and listened raptly. She judged that Forbes must be telling him a story, and after the manner of her kind, she found this additional ground for worship. As a matter of fact Forbes was giving in detail the life-history of a pony he had owned when a boy. This chronicle concluded, he went on to describe a bear hunt in which he had

once participated, and found his reward in the admiring gaze his listener fastened upon him.

Presently Charlie Briggs felt constrained to be entertaining in turn. "I'm going to get a new papa, pretty soon," he announced.

Forbes felt an uncomfortable sense of shock. If the woman in the opposite section were a widow, the age of the child in her arms indicated that her bereavement was extremely recent. It seemed more probable that it was one of the cases which prove the frailty of the marriage bond in America. He did not know why this conjecture should be responsible for so marked a feeling of discomfort.

He changed the subject abruptly and proceeded to entertain Charlie with an imaginary incident in the life of a gray squirrel, taking Thompson Seton as his model. In the course of the narrative the baby had an attack of crying and its shrieks distracted Forbes' attention. He hesitated, lost the thread of his story, became hopelessly entangled.

Charlie understood his friend's confusion. He looked across the aisle, scowling darkly. "She's going to get rid of the baby pretty soon," he informed his companion. "To-morrow it won't be 'round to bother."

Again Forbes was conscious of a feeling of revulsion. The child's remark was capable of several interpretations, but to his thinking the meaning was obvious. This pretty little woman was about to marry for the second time, and the husband-to-be objected to the size of the ready-made family. Evidently she planned to give the baby away. Rather absurdly Forbes found himself thinking that he would not have believed it of her.

The baby was behaving outrageously, almost justifying its mother's unnatural intention. Agatha had become sadly disheveled. Her hair—she really had wonderful hair, Forbes owned, for all his disapproval—was gradually slipping down. Her face was crimson from her exertions. The shirt-waist, immaculate when she boarded the Pullman, was mussed, and one shoulder damp, due to the baby's repeated experiments to ascertain whether it possessed nutritive qualities. As Forbes involuntarily looked at the opposite section, the ear-splitting sounds compelling his reluctant attention, Agatha transferred the baby's head to the other shoulder, cuddling the little form close to her heart. There was such divinely patient tenderness in the gesture that Forbes underwent an instant revulsion of feeling.

He did not understand it in the least, but he suddenly felt sure of the woman. Whatever the shortcomings of Mr. Briggs or his probable successor, the girlish wife did not lack womanly qualities. He was unjust enough to feel decidedly vexed with the little boy. Probably he had listened to discussions of matters he did not understand, and mixed things up. Forbes told himself that he had never liked precocious children.

The baby suddenly decided to go to sleep. Its squalls ceased magically. Its little body, stiffened in unavailing protest against all the injustice of the world, relaxed in complete forgetfulness. The feverish flush receded from Agatha's brow. She sat with drooping eyelids, a pensive madonna. Forbes' wilful gaze would not observe the bounds of propriety. Again and again it sought her, and when at length his eyes encountered hers, he smiled his congratulations. She gave him back a timid smile with a curious underlying wistfulness. It needed only that smile to clinch his faith in her.

When the call for luncheon was given, he crossed the aisle. "Won't you let me stay with the children while you eat? With the baby asleep, I think I can safely make the offer."

In a voice hardly above a whisper, Agatha explained that they had brought sandwiches.

"But you'll let me bring you in a cup of tea or coffee, won't you? You've had a very strenuous morning and you certainly need something in the way of a stimulant."

Perversely Agatha declined the offer, though she was longing to say yes. It was not that she felt the need of tea or coffee or of anything so gross as food or drink, but there was something ineffably refreshing in his solicitude for her comfort. His good offices declined, Forbes touched his hat and was turning away, when Charlie Briggs plunged into the aisle and seized his coat. "I don't want you to go," he howled.

Forbes came back, boyishly eager. "Let me take him with me, won't you? You will have your hands full enough with the three and I promise not to give him anything a child of his age ought not to eat."

Agatha had already regretted her obduracy. She gave the desired permission with a radiant smile, impelling Forbes to think excusingly how very young she must have been when she married Mr. Briggs. As he went toward the dining-car, Charlie clinging to his hand, the owner of the poodle ex-

pressed to her husband the conviction that something or somebody was shameless. She would have characterized herself as possessing a forgiving disposition but would have added that there are some things nobody can be expected to overlook. The case of the two children, six months apart, was one of them.

Forbes returned from the dining-car looking at his watch. The porter appeared without warning and brushed him off obsequiously. Agatha's heart contracted. It needed no prophet to foretell what was about to happen.

He came to her side, addressing her pleasantly. "I leave you at the next station. I expect to meet a friend there. I wish I might have gone farther and relieved you a little of your responsibilities."

He checked himself suddenly, thinking that this rather silent young woman was about to speak. She was looking up at him with a strange, disconcerting earnestness. Nor had his intuition been at fault. For a moment Agatha did battle with an almost irresistible temptation to shout at him, "I am Agatha Kent."

Almost at once she realized the folly of her momentary purpose. He was about to leave the train.

There was no time for explanations, to say nothing of coming to an understanding. Moreover it was possible that the friend he was to meet was Julia herself. This last thought completed the paralysis of her passing impulse. In a stifled voice she told him that he had been very kind.

"You are a very courageous young woman," Forbes replied. "I hope you won't be too tired when you reach your destination." He patted Charlie's shoulder and turned away. The obsequious porter was removing his grips. With a last smile to Agatha he went down the aisle.

Agatha leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes. The tears ran down her cheeks unchecked. Probably this was the last time she would ever see him and that was no cause for regret since the pleasure of such encounters was so over-balanced by the pain. And moreover he must be on the point of marrying Julia, if he had not already made her his wife. It was better that he should go his way, unaware that again their paths had crossed.

Forbes, stepping to the station platform, gave his grips to a station porter and looked about for Warren. A minute or two passed before he could distinguish him in the crowd and he was beginning to

think his friend was late, when his eye fell upon him standing at the edge of the platform and gazing idly at the train which had been a little behindhand, and was already beginning to pull out.

Forbes approached him briskly, the porter at his heels. His lips were parted to speak the other's name, when Warren started violently and took a step forward. "Hephzibah!" he shouted.

Forbes spun on his heel. The coach he had just quitted was passing. From the window a girl looked out, a girl with disheveled red-gold hair and tear-stained cheeks. In an instant he understood. The girl in charge of the four children was Agatha. It could be nobody but Agatha. He knew now what she had wanted to say when she had looked up at him. He understood the wistfulness of her smile, the entreaty in her eyes. He had searched for her vainly all winter, and a moment before he had talked to her face to face and had not known.

Forbes' reason was in abeyance. The last car of the long vestibuled-train was just abreast him, moving with considerable velocity. With a spring he gained the lower step, seizing the railings on either side. He was vaguely aware of a shout from the receding platform and he almost thought he could

distinguish Warren's voice lifted in a bellow of astonishment. But for the time being all other emotions were submerged by an overwhelming satisfaction in the realization that Agatha and he were still fellow travelers.

CHAPTER XXIII

AN INTRODUCTION

FORBES waited for the door to be opened with sensations approximating those of a naughty boy, caught in mischief. Man of the world as he was, he recoiled from the prospect before him. He had never been of the temperament to ignore precedent and defy regulations, and the necessary explanations to outraged authority were no more attractive because they were something new in his experience. Hardly more agreeable than his anticipations of an interview with the conductor was the realization of the probable comments of his fellow passengers, the smiles that would be exchanged, the curious conjectures passed from one to another, as to the occasion for his act.

As Forbes reflected ruefully on the coming ordeal, his hat was lifted lightly from his head and sent whirling on an independent journey. His impulse to snatch after it was checked by the discovery that

he needed both hands for another purpose, needed them imperatively, for the lurch of the train had nearly thrown him off his balance. He tightened his grip and gave himself up to irritated reflection. Like most men, Forbes was pathetically dependent on his hat. He never so much as crossed the street without it. Now it would be necessary to make the rest of his journey hatless and leave the train in some unfamiliar city, stared at by the crowd who would mistake him for a faddist, demonstrating a protest against conventional garb. Forbes' annoyance gave vent in a profane ejaculation.

The next to go were his eye-glasses. Again Forbes' inclination to clutch for his vanishing possessions was conquered just in time to save him from following in their wake. The narrow margin by which he had missed death did not prevent him from grieving over his glasses. He had no others with him. He would not be able to read till he reached home, and the strain on his eyes would probably bring on a severe headache. His hat could be replaced at the first shop, but not his glasses. He found it hard to be reconciled to such ill luck.

It was several minutes before the realization was brought home to Forbes that the loss of these belong-

ings was a very trifling matter. By that time his feeling of reluctance to have the door opened had entirely vanished. In his boyhood he had frequently played "crack the whip." His sensations when the line of runners suddenly halted, and he, a little fellow bringing up the rear, was sent sprawling over the grass, were being duplicated in this memorable ride. The express was playing "crack the whip" with himself as snapper. Once as the train rounded a curve, both feet flew from under him, and the unexpected jerk upon his arms almost broke his hold. He could hardly believe in his good fortune when he found himself still standing on the step, holding on literally for dear life. For now he knew that in his desperate determination to see Agatha again, he had taken his life in his hands.

Oddly enough it was not the likelihood of a sudden and violent death which presented itself most forcibly to his imagination. The opportunities he had missed with Agatha were infinitely more disturbing. If only he had spoken in her defense the day Julia had exhausted her ingenuity in wounding and insulting the rival she instinctively feared. But he had stood silent while Julia's malice spent itself. And later when time had revealed the affair

in a truer perspective, if he had but gone to her and said to her all that was in his heart, she might have been his wife by now. One inevitably gets down to realities when life flickers like a candle in the wind, and Forbes no longer debated the question of Agatha's love for him. In addition to Warren's testimony, he had the memory of a kiss, a dream kiss, pressed on his cheeks as he struggled back to consciousness after the stormy interview with Hephzibah, a kiss salt with tears and sweet with ineffable promise. Forbes heard his bitter laughter above the roar of the train. "God!" his voice said, "what a mess I've made of things."

Forbes had never had a high opinion of the intelligence of that portion of the traveling public which puts its head out of the window of a moving train. Indeed he had always classified it with the people who maim or kill their best friends by playful maneuvers with guns that are not loaded. From this time on, his ideas on the subject were to be revolutionized. He was destined to think of the above-named individuals as philanthropists of a high order.

A man in the smoking-car, thrusting his head out of the window at a time when the curving of the

track brought the rear coach into full view, made a discovery which he promptly imparted to the conductor. That official, properly incredulous, extended his own head from the window and verified the passenger's astonishing statement. And at the moment when Forbes' imagination was busy with the gruesome details relating to the discovery of his lifeless body lying beside the tracks, the vestibule door suddenly opened and the face of indignant authority looked down at him.

They dragged Forbes inside after unclenching his hands for him, his stiffened muscles refusing that simple service. The conductor failing to recognize in this disheveled individual with the unsteady knees, the respectable passenger whose ticket he had punched earlier in the trip, not unnaturally assumed that Forbes was drunk and acting on that supposition, proceeded to make himself very disagreeable. As Forbes regained his shaken dignity, and paid his fare, the man in uniform became less truculent and in the end, positively congratulatory.

Forbes' grips were in the possession of an unknown porter at a station some thirty miles back, and he made as satisfactory a toilet as was possible without the aid of their contents, before returning

to the coach where lately he had devoted himself to entertaining Charlie Briggs, unaware that the door of Paradise stood ajar just across the aisle. Here disappointment awaited him. Agatha, having learned from bitter experience that activity is the best of balms for a sore heart, had resolved on washing the hands and faces of her charges and giving their hair proper attention. To make the toilet of four children in the limited accommodations of a Pullman, with the certainty that at any moment the lurch of the train may precipitate you into the wash basin, or through the hanging curtains out into the aisle, is a process requiring time and patience. Forbes sat in his former place, biting his lips for three-quarters of an hour before he saw the little procession slowly making its way down the aisle.

Forbes' uncomfortable uncertainty as to whether he had made a fool of himself or not, vanished at the sight of Agatha. Worn and weary as she looked, her eyes still reddened from weeping, she had never seemed to him so infinitely dear and desirable. Such trivial things as corrugated palms and lost eyeglasses and a narrow escape from death, no longer mattered.

Charlie Briggs was the first to discover him.

"My man's come back," he shouted jubilantly and ran into Forbes' arms. Agatha's eyes followed him, and she stopped short, her flushed cheeks paling. For a moment Forbes thought her about to faint and started to his feet to assist her, but immediately she had regained her self-control and walked steadily to her seat, though as a matter of fact she did not feel the floor beneath her feet and was scarcely conscious of the child in her arms. He had come back and intuition told her why.

Forbes rose and crossed the aisle. "Charlie," he said in a voice of authority, "take your little sisters to my seat and play with them for a while."

Charlie Briggs demurred.

"Run along," Forbes insisted. "And when I get a chance to buy you some candy you shall have enough to make you sick for a month."

"Us too?" asked the curly-haired girl, ready to oppose any unfair sex-discrimination.

"Yes, you, too," Forbes promised recklessly. "Enough so all three of you will need a doctor."

It was not in human nature to resist such a bribe. The three crossed immediately to the opposite section. Forbes took the seat at Agatha's side.

A silence at once inevitable and ridiculous fell be-

tween them. There was so much to be said that there seemed no rational starting point. He wanted to ask what she was doing with all those children, but the query seemed to put her on the defensive. She was longing to know how after leaving the train, he could possibly be aboard again, but she left the first move to him. Presently a mutual attraction drew their eyes together and Forbes lost no more time.

"Have you had long enough," he said a trifle unsteadily, "to decide on that proposition I made you nine months ago to a day?"

"I—I— What proposition do you mean?"

"That we should set up housekeeping together?"

Agatha seemed trying to remember. "Wasn't that for last winter only?"

"No. It's for this summer and next winter and for all the summers and winters that ever will be."

She regarded him amazedly. "You're not—you can't be—"

"But I am, exactly that. Will you marry me, Agatha?"

"Listen!" A little flutter of laughter escaped her and he loved the sound of it. "Do you realize those are the first words you've ever spoken to me—the

real *me,* that we've just been introduced? Of course we had any number of good talks when I was Great-aunt Agatha Kent."

"Bless her dear heart!" Forbes interjected gratefully.

"And we had one rather exciting interview when I was Hephzibah."

"Yes, I have reason to remember that interview." He looked at her meaningly and gloated over her blush.

"And now I'm just Agatha," she went on bravely, ignoring her scarlet cheeks. "And the very first words you say to me are to ask me to marry you."

"And they're the words I shall keep saying till you promise."

She shot him a side-long glance. "But what—what about Julia?"

"She was married early in January. They have been spending the winter in Palm Beach, I understand."

"Oh!" There was such compassion in her voice, such pitying tenderness in her eyes that she had a narrow escape from being kissed on the spot.

He compromised by taking her hand. "Listen, dear girl. Let's clear this thing up once for all.

I've had a narrow escape. The Julia I loved was no more real than your Hephzibah. I knew my mistake that day when she attacked you at Oak Knoll. The cruelty of it was a revelation. I can't understand now why I listened without protest, but you must remember that I had received a staggering surprise."

"Staggering and cruel!" Her fingers tightened about his. "I tried so hard to tell you everything that day in the woods and I was such a coward that the words wouldn't come. How can you ever forgive me?"

"Hush, dear love! I shall shock this train-load of people if you are not careful. I was too dazed and bewildered that first day to be quite responsible for what I did or left undone. But within twenty-four hours I spoke my mind so plainly as to terminate the friendship between Miss Studley and myself. I have never seen nor heard from her since."

The look she turned on him made him hang his head. The certainty that elates most men, humbles those of finer mold.

"Agatha, my dearest, you talk of my forgiving you. Can you ever forgive me?"

The train was slowing for a stop before they had

settled that delicate question. Agatha argued that it was preposterous to talk of forgiving one who in every relation of life was absolute perfection. Forbes insisted that her attitude proved her an angel. The baby, with a discretion beyond its years, refrained from offering any interruption to this absorbing conversation, though occasionally its toothless gums were revealed in what might have impressed the unprejudiced on-looker as a derisive smile.

After the brief stop, a train boy appeared shouting Forbes' name. He proved to be the bearer of a telegram from Warren. Forbes and Agatha read it together:

"If enough is left of you to make the marriage ceremony valid advise clenching matter at the first stop run no risk of letting her get away from us again."

"Warren seems to be laboring under the impression," frowned Forbes, "that he comes in on this. Except for that slight error—"

Agatha interpolated irrelevantly that Warren was a dear.

"He's not half bad," Forbes admitted generously.

"And apart from his erroneous impression that this is a partnership affair, the message impresses me favorably. What do you think?"

"How do you know," questioned Agatha interestedly, "that I'm not already married to a widower with four small children?"

"I'll own the thought crossed my mind. But I wouldn't consider it. You looked too sad for a bride."

Agatha put her hand into his quite shamelessly. "Of course I would look sad if I had been so silly as to marry somebody else."

"Who are these children anyway?" Forbes asked, as if he had just thought of it.

"Orphans. Orphans who are going to be adopted. The homes have been investigated and they're all right. Now I'm going to leave the children for a six months' trial, and if at the end of that time everybody is satisfied, they will be legally adopted." Agatha added casually that they would reach the baby's future home at five o'clock and that she would be rather glad to get him off her hands before nightfall. Forbes recalled a statement of Charlie Briggs much to the same effect, and was man enough to apologize mentally to the youngster.

Agatha's next remark had to Forbes a delicious suggestion of wifely authority. "Why aren't you wearing your glasses?"

He explained the fate of those cherished belongings and did his best to make light of the whole affair. But Agatha was not to be deceived. Her eyes widened to surprising proportions. Her face grew white.

"You might have been killed. It's a miracle you weren't killed."

His distress over the discovery that she was crying was spiced with ecstasy. She interrupted his clumsy efforts at comfort with self-accusation. "And if you had been killed, I would have been to blame."

"Why, in heaven's name, dearest? My own folly would have been solely responsible. But when I realized that I had actually spoken face to face with you, and that you were escaping me again, I lost my head completely."

"If I'd told you who I was, you wouldn't have had any reason to risk your life. And so if anything had happened it would have been all my fault."

He took a rather base advantage of her self-reproach. "I'll forgive you on one condition. As

I understand it, after you have made arrangements about the baby you will spend the night at a hotel and take the train to-morrow."

"Yes, that's my plan."

"And my plan is that you marry me to-morrow morning."

"I had intended," Agatha answered reflectively, "to take an eight o'clock train."

"I suppose a later one will do."

"Very likely. But a wedding without a trousseau! I am equal to a trousseau now, you know. I have—or did have a little while ago—a fortune of twelve thousand dollars."

"I can't think," Forbes murmured, "of anything I should enjoy better than helping to select a trousseau—a little later."

"You know I'm responsible for Miss Finch," Agatha said breathlessly, "She's not going to be married after all."

"Miss Finch is a member of my family from now on."

"And Howard! It was all make-believe that he was a young friend of mine. He's really my darling brother."

"And mine as soon as you say the word. Dear

little Miss Proteus," cried Forbes with a laugh that did not disguise the tenderness of his voice, "I'm afraid to let you out of my sight for fear you'll change into something else, a mermaid or a fairy, and be lost to me forever."

"I'm sure it will disappoint Mrs. Van Horne if I come back with a husband," mused Agatha. "It will seem such a childish performance. And yet—when you've made up your mind that all that's left in life for you is to go on doing your duty and trying to be kind to everybody, and then happiness comes back and knocks at your door, you—you—oh, Burton—it's not in human nature to keep her waiting."

After a party, consisting of a smiling gentleman, a radiant girl and four tired children, had left the train, one of the people who always know the details of everybody's business, sketched their history for the benefit of the owner of the poodle.

"They had a dreadful quarrel, you know, the way young people will, and she was going home to her father's. Somehow or other he learned what train she was to take and got aboard just at the last minute."

The listener knitted blonde brows. "I didn't

really feel sure the woman was in her right mind. She made some absurd statement about those two little girls. Said there was six months' difference in their ages."

"She was so excited she didn't know what she was saying," explained the omniscient traveler. "He sent her messages by the little boy and when she wouldn't pay any attention, he brought her to time by standing on the steps of the rear coach for more than an hour. It was a wonder he wasn't killed."

The stout blonde expressed the opinion that it was woman's place to forgive.

"Well, that melted her, and you can't wonder. The porter in the rear coach told our porter that when they dragged him aboard he hardly had strength to stand on his feet. It didn't take them long to get things fixed up after that. I went for a drink of water after they'd been talking for half an hour or so, and he'd picked up the baby, and I'm pretty sure from the way he held that child, he was using it just as a screen and kissing the mother behind it."

"Awful fretful baby," commented the stout blonde. "I'm glad it won't be on the train to-night."

"Looks as if they'd started out to have a real old-fashioned family," said the omniscient narrator. "None of the children looks like her but the curly-haired girl and the boy are the image of their papa."

THE END

